

# DreamSpeak

## An Interview With Jay Vogelsong

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Questions by Robert Waggoner

*Jay Vogelsong is the coauthor, with his wife Janice Brooks, of the book **The Conscious Exploration of Dreaming: Discovering How We Create and Control Our Dreams**. He has had an interest in lucid dreaming for over twenty years, and was an active lucid dreamer himself from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s. He is especially interested in the implications of lucid dreaming and dream control for dream theory and research, and used his own lucidity primarily to experiment in his dreams.*

**So Jay, you are married to Janice Brooks, whom we interviewed for DreamSpeak in LDE #27. Did you know about lucid dreaming before you met Janice, or did she initiate you into lucid dreaming?**

I was heavily involved with lucid dreaming for several years before I started corresponding with Janice. It was our mutual interest in the subject that brought us together to begin with (though we obviously found out we had a lot more in common). That's not to say I did not learn a great deal from her, but that I think she learned a few things from me as well.

I would like to mention right up front that I think it very important for lucid dreamers to share their thoughts and observations the way Ruth Sacksteder, Janice and I did through our three-way correspondence. The possibilities of lucid dreaming are so great that many lucid dreamers miss important points otherwise. I think *The Lucid Dream Exchange* provides a very valuable service to lucid dreamers for that reason.

**How, then, did you get your start as a lucid dreamer?**

I had known about lucid dreaming since the late 1970s, when I read Charles Tart's *Altered States Of Consciousness*. At that time I even had a few lucid dreams, but I was not by any means a natural lucid dreamer like Janice.

When I started recording my lucid dreams in late 1987, after reading Stephen LaBerge's *Lucid Dreaming*, I only remembered having experienced six lucid dreams in the previous decade.

Even after making serious efforts to induce lucidity, I was only averaging about one lucid incident a month or so for the first couple of years. It was only after I started using the napping technique regularly, which I learned to do from the Lucidity Institute, that I improved my average to something like ten incidents a month at my peak, or something like one lucid incident for every two or three times I tried induction. Now that I no longer have time to practice napping, I am back to having only sporadic lucid incidents.

I was an active member of the Lucidity Institute from when it started publishing its newsletter in 1989. I started corresponding with Janice and Ruth in 1991, and they taught me even more about lucid dreaming.

**Tell us about your first lucid dream experiences? What were they like?**

In the first such incident I recorded, dating from sometime in the late 1970s, I realized I was dreaming and walked out in the street in front of traffic, to see if I could visualize a car passing through me. The first two cars disappeared before they hit me, but the third approximated what I wanted. Most of such early incidents were, however, plagued by the common problems of waking too fast or losing lucidity too soon. It took awhile for me to learn the variety of skills required to become a regular and proficient lucid dreamer.

**At that time, were you doing some intentional practice or trying to have lucid dreams? Or did they simply happen?**

I have almost never had any spontaneous lucid incidents. The lucid incidents I did have seemingly always followed my reading about or thinking about such things, and only happened regularly because of determined induction.

**Janice mentions that she recalls lucid dreams from about age 7, and then began to have the classical OBE feelings around age 13. In your experience, did the onset of lucid dreaming result in later experiences of classical OBE symptoms?**

I had only one experience which approximated an OBE. I separated from my sleeping body, turned around and looked at myself lying in my bed, then picked up my tape recorder off the dresser and beat my sleeping figure with it, to see if I could wake myself up that way. I couldn't, of course, but had to swim awake naturally a bit later. I thought that was hilarious, though.

**Do you consider OBEs a type of lucid dream?**

I certainly consider OBEs on a continuum with lucid and ordinary dreaming experiences. One point I would like to make is that there is usually no clear line to draw between these various experiences. That's why I prefer the term "lucid incident in a dream" to "lucid dream." Even in a so-called "lucid dream," I can be lucid about one thing and far from lucid about another.

I believe OBE-style dreaming is largely the result of a specific balance of brain chemistry when falling asleep.

Since I typically fall asleep quickly and deeply, I never got to experiment as I would have liked to with OBEs, but instead rely on Janice's experiences and opinions for my understanding of their characteristics.

**If you would, please tell us about some of your most interesting lucid dreams? I understand that you've popped the heads off of dream characters and bent a few cars with your bare hands!**

Most people are surprised by the head-popping I did in my dreams, simply because it betrays that I don't believe dream characters are in any way real. Of course, even the character I am playing in my dreams is not real, and I similarly popped my own head off on one occasion, with the result that I was somehow looking at the back of my own head, which I held in my hands.

I have dived off the top of a five-story building into the pavement of a parking lot, have flown through mirrors to see what was behind them, have pressed one arm through another and my fingers into my head, have controlled what dream characters have said to me and how they behaved, have made scenes appear and disappear, have experimented with tastes and temperatures and colors and so on.

One very interesting and simple experiment I did several times was to close my dream eyes. Just as in waking, the scene typically disappeared. At other times, I jumped through ceilings to make scenes disappear intentionally, to experiment with starting dreams from scratch as it were. I have also done a fair amount of mid-air gymnastics, which was interesting in that I even got the sensation of movement in my inner ear. And I once stretched a dream character's nose and chin and tied them in a knot.

I was from the start most interested in experimenting in dreams to see what happened when I mentally behaved differently, and to see how much I could control of what was going on, to get my fingers on the buttons.

**You and Janice co-authored a book, *The Conscious Exploration Of Dreaming*, which was published in 2000. What was the impetus for writing a book about dreams and lucid dreaming?**

Ruth, Janice, and I carried on a rather intense correspondence in the early 1990s. At that time, I lived in Texas, Ruth was in California and Janice in Pennsylvania. That was before we had Internet access, so everything was sent through the mail. Anyway, we tried just about everything we could think of in our lucid dreams, and had great fun sharing experiment ideas and dream accounts. We would regularly send each other pages and pages of reports and speculations, and at a point realized that we had the makings of a book. We didn't know of any other group of lucid dreamers who had developed our particular perspectives, or who had articulated the ideas we were coming up with in any of the publications we had read.

We all agreed on an outline for the book, split up the chapters between us, then started writing those chapters and sending them to each other for comments and revisions. At a point, however, Ruth had to drop out of the project for personal reasons, but Janice and I continued working on the book for years, writing and rewriting it as we developed our ideas. Indeed, we accumulated so much information that we had to divide a late draft in two and save part of our material for another book. Janice plans to finish the second book, to be titled "Dream Control", sometime in the future. That book will cover the techniques we learned in more detail.

The main question we try to answer in *The Conscious Exploration Of Dreaming* is: What do the controlled dreams, which are made possible by lucidity, tell us about the nature of dream creation, and what are the implications for such a perspective on dream interpretations and applications? In the book, we explain our experiments and observations in some detail, and attempt to integrate our experiences with scientific dream theory.

**As I recall from your talk at the ASD conference, your basic thesis appears to be "that dreams are created by employing our world-modeling abilities while we sleep to try to make sense of whatever cues happen to reach our awareness." Expand on that.**

Our brains are trained when we are awake, specifically to respond to waking circumstances. We have so little mental wherewithal when we are asleep that we are typically disabled from learning about dreams when we are dreaming. We can't ask ourselves what is happening and why, don't think to try out different behaviors and so on. The results are not only that we must typically

study dreaming from waking alone, but more importantly that we think and act as if we are awake when we are dreaming, because that is the only frame of reference we have learned how to apply.

That situation changes when we become lucid, or even semi-lucid. Suddenly, we can ask ourselves what is happening and why, can try out different behaviors more suited to the dream environment, and can observe how the dream itself responds. And what we find when we do so is that dream content changes with our changes in perspective. It becomes obvious we can control all sorts of things in our dreams once we realize they are self-generated rather than just "out there."

**You also state that this idea "rests on a much older idea of our brains as active participants in the creation of our perceptions of reality, as described in detail by William James' 1890 work, *Principles of Psychology*." Other than processing sense stimuli, in what way is the brain an "active participant" in our perception of reality?**

We are very selective of input from the environment through the agency of focused attention, so much so that our experiences are what we pay attention to, not just what seems to happen to us. If we are not paying attention, we may not be gathering experiences at all, and our world is narrower as a consequence. In that sense, we are continually building the reality we will live in, by means of selective attention. And of course this habitual process, as I mentioned above, carries over into our dreaming as well.

As an example, I remember one dream incident in which a man was striding toward me in a very threatening manner. Since I was lucid, I simply turned away and ignored him, with the consequence that he disappeared from my dream altogether. That's the kind of trick made possible by my realizing I was no longer in Kansas. In the real world, and consequently in ordinary dreaming as well, I would certainly not behave in any such way, but would keep an eye on the guy. As a result, in ordinary dreaming, he would continue to be a part of my dream, and would probably continue to bother me as well. That attention problem is the origin of the threatening dream characters we can never seem to escape. They are maintained by our obsessive, waking-world-trained awareness. Apply this same principle into multiple specific dream situations, and you begin to see how dreams can be controlled to a much greater extent than is usually assumed.

**Are you suggesting that both one's waking experience and one's dreaming experience employ the same set of perceptual functioning and cognitive functioning?**

This is the theory Janice and I develop at length in our book. In waking, such cognitive functioning results in the perception of reality and all that that includes. In sleep, it results in the creation of dreams. The differences between the two states, including all the instabilities, discontinuities, confabulations, and so on in dreaming, result from specific deficits of the dreaming state as compared with waking: the lack of any stabilizing external reality and the lack of access to stabilizing memories. We not only lose track of external reality, but also largely lose track of who and where we are. We typically lack lucidity, and that causes us to behave in some rather peculiar ways in our dreams, depending on what specific aspects of waking reality we concurrently recall.

**You also mention J. Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley proposed the "activation-synthesis" hypothesis as a neurophysiological model of dreaming. It maintains that dreaming is the result of automatic brain-stem signaling. Briefly, how does that hypothesis interact with your ideas?**

In waking, our perceptions cue off selective inputs to create the pictures in our brains we call reality. In dreaming, we similarly cue off whatever is present in the dream, including such things as our own thoughts, emotions, associations and expectations, and any sensory signals that might filter in from the outside world, like light, sound, sleeping position, etc. Further, the brain itself generates a great amount of electrical and chemical "noise" as it does whatever it is doing while we are sleeping. Scientists believe that this activity results in both the level of activation of the brain necessary to dream at all, as well as much of the background for its content. From our point of view, that activation is the screen on which we project our dreams. Unlike Dr. Hobson and Dr. McCarley, however, we believe much of the imposition of dream content is conscious (albeit from a reduced amount of awareness) rather than automatic. Nor do we believe activation is the sole source of dreaming, but rather one of a number of cues, or suggestion factors as we call them.

**If I understand your material correctly, in a basic sense you feel that expectation and suggestion latch onto free-floating mental cues (like day residue or inner conflicts) in the dream state, and begin to spin them into dreams. Then the dreaming process is further enhanced by our habits, associations, thoughts, and feeling-mental processes, which shapes the dream's content. Is that right?**

Suggestion may latch onto anything at all in the dreaming state, resulting in specific dream images. We believe day residue and inner conflicts only cue a minority of dreams. The majority of dreams result from suggestion factors coming from within the dream itself at the time we are dreaming. In the absence of lucidity, we typically interact with anything as if it were real, not just realities. Dreams are therefore not usually about specific waking issues; this explains dreaming's largely divergent content.

**So, how does lucid dreaming give insight into the nature of dreaming? Is it that when lucid, often what we "expect" to happen, does indeed happen?**

Yes indeed. That shouldn't happen at all if the unconscious model, or any other automatic model, of dream creation were correct.

**What would you say about those lucid dreams in which the "unexpected" happens? Or when we confidently assume that our lucid skills will result in a certain event or situation, and something surprising happens; not at all like what we were expecting?**

First, you must remember that we isolated a number of suggestion factors, only two of which are expectation and assumption. Sometimes other factors dominate.

Second, the control of lucid dreams has its limitations, many of which are inherent to the state and are not subject to much modification. Exploring the limits is often as interesting as trying to control things, though, because the limits are every bit as illuminating of the dreaming process. But that is only an argument for pressing the limits, not against trying to do so.

Third, sometimes one must practice to get a certain effect successfully or consistently. In that sense, dream control is a skill one learns, just like cooking or golfing or riding a bike. A failure is not necessarily indicative of what is possible.

**And how about those lucid dreams, when a totally new element appears? I recall Janice mentioned that her serial dream characters in her lucid dreams exhibited surprising and volitional actions on occasion -- in fact, one apparently wanted her dead! How is this type of creativity and un-expected-ness accounted for in a suggestion theory of dreaming?**

Janice told me how to answer this one. Janice based her recurring dream characters on specific real people from waking, primarily two actors and one musician. The specific dream character in question was based on a TV actor who typically played a bad guy, so Janice had a strong automatic association for the type of contrary behavior he sometimes displayed. If he had suddenly started knitting mittens, you might have a point, but the fact that he didn't, but rather behaved in accordance with the associations Janice had built up about him, actually supports our perspective.

This is, incidentally, why no one but you, the dreamer, has even the potential to accurately interpret your dreams. The range of possible associations for any specific aspect of a dream is so great that only you might be able to say with any confidence what may have inspired it. You should not let any expert tell you what to think, us included. And we are not really trying to do that. Instead, we are suggesting other possible interpretations to add to the total, things we have seen demonstrated in our own lucid dreams. We therefore believe our book should arm dreamers against many common oversimplifications. Dreaming is a very complex activity.

Is it possible that one of our world modeling sets may be a kind of ontological mentally alchemical transformation of various thoughts, feelings and intuitions into something totally new, unexpected and creative? I mean, if we are a mental jukebox with 200 programs to play, eventually we'll get tired of the same old jive and responding in the same old routine ways. Seems to me that lucid dreaming, as a model, supports the argument for creative transformational insight as a natural mental/cognitive process. What do you think?

I have no doubt whatsoever that dreaming is a creative process with which my awareness (however attenuated by brain chemistry) is intricately involved. I don't think it is a question of 200 or 2000 or 20,000. Each dream is unique, regardless of the repeated patterns. Lucid dreaming just expands the range of possibilities laterally, as it were.

**Could one state that when we become lucid in a dream and consciously recognize the nature of our dreaming experience, that we have broken free of normal neural functioning? Or have we simply broken out of the slavery of unconscious neural functions to the relative joy but continued slavery of higher-level conscious neural functions?**

Janice and I believe dreaming is a conscious, rather than an unconscious, process. When we become lucid, we have shifted our brain chemistry around a little (which is why the napping technique often works so well, since it messes up our brain chemistry just a bit). This may allow us to use neural pathways usually unavailable to the dreaming mind, but also allows us to develop new patterns of thought based on new experiences.

**Does it surprise you that lucid dreaming has not had a greater impact on psychology and understanding dreams and the nature of consciousness?**

Not really, given how new the observations are as well as the general level of thought applied to lucid dreaming phenomena. However, we do believe lucid dreaming experiences have a great potential in this regard. We would not have written what we did otherwise.

**Any final thoughts?**

I would like for those serious lucid dreamers who read this periodical to think about how they might be able to contribute to a real scientific understanding of lucid dreaming and of dreaming in general. Janice and I know of one researcher at Harvard Medical School, Dr. Robert Stickgold, an associate of Dr. Hobson's, who has expressed some interest in working with lucid dreamers in the lab, specifically in brain imaging studies. Perhaps LDE could approach him about the possibility of doing an interview sometime, to find out what he thinks could or should be done in this area.

Finally, thanks for the opportunity to express our opinions.

**Lastly, if someone would like to purchase the book that you and Janice wrote, what should they do?**

If anyone is interested in an in-depth discussion of the issues surrounding lucid dreaming phenomena, our book *The Conscious Exploration Of Dreaming* can be ordered from Amazon.com or through almost any bookstore that handles special orders.