

DreamSpeak

An Interview With Jeff Warren

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Questions by Robert Waggoner

*Jeff Warren, the author of the recent book, **The Head Trip**, (Random House, 2007) looks at lucid dreaming and the wider realm of conscious experience in this quarter's DreamSpeak interview. When not completely in his head, Jeff writes and produces radio for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and lives in Toronto. Read more about his book at:*

<http://www.headtrip.ca>

How did you become interested in lucid dreaming?

When I was a kid I read an *Omni* article about lucid dreaming and spent many fruitless weeks trying to hook up with the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models that adorned the walls of my room. It seemed like a particularly thrilling form of play then, a forum for exercising super powers. Of course I never got to exercise any of these powers. I was a terrible lucid dreamer then, and I'm a terrible lucid dreamer now. I usually get beat up in my lucid dreams, or I crash into hedges when I try to fly, or – most often – I just get ignored by indifferent dream characters.

What do you recall of your first lucid dream(s)? Anything odd, unusual, or unexpected?

My first real lucid dream happened the day my NovaDreamer™ arrived in the mail. I went to sleep all charged with expectations. My girlfriend at the time thought I looked ridiculous. The whole night the NovaDreamer™ kept going off and waking me up, cutting off circulation in the top half of my head and generally creating a total nuisance of itself. I finally woke up near dawn, frustrated, and reached up to take off the mask. As a kind of journalistic precautionary measure I hit the “reality testing button” (is there a more ontologically radical push-button component in the history of technology?). Instead of chirping and flashing, it made a kind of “thunk” noise.

It dawned on me that I wasn't actually awake—I was dreaming. In a perfectly executed model of my bedroom, complete with slumbering girlfriend, warm pillow and my overstuffed laundry hamper off to the side, which I could just make out below the edge of my dream mask. This blew my mind so thoroughly that all I could do for the rest of the dream was lie in my fake bed rolling my fake eyes pondering the ineffable mystery of consciousness. Since then I have had other opportunities to get out and explore.

What did you make of that?

The mind builds a model of the world whenever it's functioning. Stephen LaBerge told me that and I agree. The crazy thing is not that we move through a model of the world in dreaming; it's that we move through a model of the world in waking as well. Cue the *X-Files* theme.

At some point, you began to realize that lucid dreams held greater significance. How so?

Lucid dreams are a terrific opportunity to study consciousness. In waking conscious awareness is flooded with sensory input; we are constantly attending to that visual, auditory and tactile flow. In dreaming the sensory input gate is slammed shut. Our awareness is in theory undiluted—it's just us and our psychological machinery. But we don't really see this—at least not in regular dreams. Instead we run around like witless actors in a production we can't control, weeping and freaking and pleading with giant kiwi fruit or whatever.

But in lucid dreams, of course, we develop agency and a certain amount of self-control. We can rewrite the plot to a certain degree. We can get out and explore—conduct experiments—and in the process learn a lot about both our own habits of mind and the nature of consciousness itself.

Why does that seem important?

When sensory input is gone, what's left? What is this dream stuff? I think, as most scientists do, that dream stuff is built from memory, but unlike many in the neuro-crowd I don't think it is random and meaningless, far from it. I think the stitching that holds together these memory elements—the plots—are a key to understanding both the waking and the dreaming mind—big 'M' Mind in general. Following Stephen LaBerge, I think this stitching speaks to our hidden expectations and assumptions about the world, which are set free in dreaming, so that we witness a kind of grotesque caricature of the self.

Lucid dreaming is obviously a great tool for generating personal insights, but it goes further than that. Since the “neurons that fire together wire together” Hebbian learning mantra is as true in dreaming as it is in waking, lucid dreaming is also an opportunity to practice all new behaviors, and thus make a lasting neural adjustment to that grand project of The Self.

When you consider the science and research so far on lucid dreaming, what surprises you?

That no one (at least no one I've read) has attempted to lay down a set of laws for dream world phenomenology—the laws of Dream World physics. I have tried to do this in *The Head Trip*—the Law of Extrema, the Law of Self-Fulfilling Expectations, The Law of Narrative Momentum, the Law of Delayed Cause and Effect, the Law of Mechanical Disorder and others. But it's barely a start.

Your readers will have many more to offer. You guys should collect new laws on this website, it's the perfect forum for it. In fact if anyone wants to send me their own laws please do! I'd love to hear them.

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Do you feel that science doesn't get it, or science ignores the potentially revolutionary aspects of lucid dreaming, perhaps from a concern about making a mess?

Yes. Western science in general just hasn't been very good about internal experience, it has always been focused on objective externals. It's an old story at this point, one every book written about consciousness in the past 15 years has recounted. The study of consciousness has received short shrift and that means dreams have too. And lucid dreams along with them. But things are changing, a new era of rigorous internal exploration seems to be taking off, from lucid dream

investigators to long-term meditators to Francisco Varela's whole neurophenomenology legacy, now championed by philosophers like Evan Thompson.

I think part of the problem is that scientists who haven't experienced real lucid dreams just don't get it. They think 'yeah I know what dreams are like—they're all washed out and sketchy.' But of course that's not what dreams are like, that's what *memories* of dreams are like. Dreams themselves are staggeringly real when you're in them, and—this is key—*really paying attention to them* (the waking corollary of the REM dream is the trance—in trances we don't notice much about our model of the world either). In my experience lucid dreaming is the best way to really pay attention.

If every scientist could experience a real fully-immersive lucid dream (not one of those halfway teaser dreams, but a real wake-up) they'd know what the big deal was. I mean it's CRAZY! We live double lives. Lucid dreamers understand this but everyone else just thinks they've been reading too many Carlos Castaneda books.

As you have looked deeper into lucid dreaming, what information do you find yourself most curious about? Or what research would you like to see?

As I said above, more research into the laws of the dream world—the laws that guide the appearance of objects, their constancy, the associations between them, the emotions underlying them. I'm really interested in how our expectations are unspooled in dreams, also the idea of dreams as predictions. If any of your readers have thoughts or experiences to that effect I'd be very curious to hear about them.

I'm also interested in the idea of witnessing in slow wave sleep, in reports of pure consciousness from within the dream itself, when all the dream content recedes and only the witnessing "I" remains.

Your book, *The Head Trip*, investigates some of the peculiarities of consciousness, where the head does some whacky stuff, like going into a trance, sleep walking, and daydreaming. What motivated you to look deeper into this area?

Partly the sense that the processes which govern dreaming don't just suddenly disappear when we wake up; rather, they go underground, and wield their mysterious influence from below. Sleep walking and (sometimes) trance are both examples of dream or sleep processes popping up in waking. But in other ways too the dream is always there. I am very interested in this, I think it's a key to understanding how the mind works. In that sense I completely agree with Freud: the royal road.

In your book, you devote a section to our psychedelic friend, Hypnagogia. Anything peculiar about those first steps into sleeping? What did you come to conclude about that curious space between wake and sleep?

So much that is peculiar! One thing that fascinates me here is the very specific progression of experiences people seem to have in this state. Most of us don't just leap directly into immersive dreams; there is a kind of halfway house of still images and non sequitor plot twists. I think of the hypnagogic as a state which facilitates reassessment; it plays an essential role in breaking up calcified patterns of waking thought, which is why so many scientists and artists have used it for problem solving.

Also I see that you have a section on hypnopompic experiences. In my experience, a Voice occasionally tells me something as I shift into wakefulness. For others, they see someone standing by their bed, or floating up in the corner. Any thoughts about that state? What it means? What may be happening?

Some of that is pretty well understood as various components of sleep paralysis, modules of the dream brain staying active too long. I think of the hypnopompic as the trippy middle section of a big Venn diagram, where both dreaming and waking overlap. I've heard that voice too, it seems to whisper messages of enormous import. One time, after a minute or two of struggling through my pons-induced body paralysis, I repeated what the voice said aloud. And since I was at a sleep clinic I got it all on tape. When I finally went back to listen, this is what I heard: "Harry versus Mad Potter." My hypnopompic voice is just another Muggle!

Final question: The waking state – real or illusory? Unfair follow-up: How do you know?

Depends what you mean by "real." But I think it's pretty solid. The philosopher Jerry Fodor has a good quote about this: don't confuse epistemological questions with metaphysical ones. Yes, the perceiving hardware is forever compromised. But that doesn't mean there isn't a shared real out there. At some point you have to appeal to common sense.

None of which means, of course, that consciousness cannot be primary. As an unreformed panpsychist, I'm up for anything.

*Jeff Warren is the author of **The Head Trip: Adventures on the Wheel of Consciousness**, published by Random House. For more information, check out his website at www.headtrip.ca*