

DreamSpeak

An Interview With Chris Olsen

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Questions by Robert Waggoner

Chris Olsen is co-producer with Kira Sass of the incredible, new, lucid dreaming documentary “Wake Up: Exploring the Potential of Lucid Dreaming.” He runs a weekly lucid dreaming group in Palo Alto, while finishing his PhD dissertation on the history of lucid dreaming. Let's welcome Chris Olsen to the LDE.

Chris, you and Kira Sass produced an excellent documentary on lucid dreaming, called *Wake Up! Exploring the Potential of Lucid Dreaming*, which was shown twice at the 2009 IASD Conference in Chicago. Tell us about the video...

The documentary is about 30 minutes long. It focuses on how lucid dreaming can potentially impact waking life. We focus on three areas: creative expression, psychotherapeutic healing, and spiritual growth. All of the interviews took place at the 2007 International Association for the Study of Dreams Conference at Sonoma State in Northern California. Images and visual scenes are blended in with the interview clips.

The film is a mixture of personal lucid dream experiences, insights, and relevant research. Some of the lucid dreams described in the film include several spiritual experiences, a child who discovers lucid dreaming and its healing potential in the midst of struggling with a terminal illness, a psychotherapy patient who confronts and embraces a threatening dream character, an artist who frequently browses an art gallery of his dreams and paints the pictures he finds there, and a woman who works through the grief of losing her father by encountering him in a lucid dream.

So you came to the 2007 IASD Conference at Sonoma State and sought out lucid dreamers to interview. Had you done background research on the interviewees, and prepared a list of questions? Or did you just wing it?

We had done research on the interviewees. We were looking for people who clearly had something to say about how lucid dreaming can improve the quality of one's waking life.

At the same time, I have a background in improvisational theatre, and this strongly informed how I conducted the interviews. One improv slogan that I kept repeating to myself was “The most important thing is what the other person just said.” So I tried to stay very much in the moment and let the direction of each interview evolve spontaneously.

We did have a few questions we asked all the interviewees, and there was a very loose format to the interviews. We started with the person sharing his or her personal entry point into lucid dreaming. That is where a lot of the lucid dreaming stories featured in the film came from. From

there I tried to stay as close as I could to the particular spark of inspiration each speaker had in relation to lucid dreaming. When it felt natural, I would steer the speakers to their particular areas of expertise.

So the interviews were pretty spontaneous. I tried not to worry too much about how all the interviews would fit together. We would work on that later.

What surprised you about the interviews and interviewees? With that many lucid dreamers, you must have had some surprises.

What surprised me most had more to do with the speakers themselves than what specifically was said. I sensed a certain similarity in the personalities of the lucid dreaming experts. First, they were remarkably articulate. It was amazing how much insight they could pack into an answer. When watching the video, some people assume the speakers had time to prepare their answers, but none of them knew what questions I was going to ask.

They also seemed to have a certain sensitivity that is hard to describe. They gave me the distinct impression that they had an inner richness of experience. I guess that's not too surprising, considering they all have expertise in a subject matter that is very connected to the internal workings of the mind. Since the interviews took place over a period of three days, this similarity in personality made a big impression on me.

Were there any interviews that helped you see the “potential” of lucid dreaming? What kind of potential for lucid dreaming began to emerge?

Quite a few themes emerged. Several speakers had lucid dreams that they considered to be dramatic life-changing spiritual experiences. These experiences were described as more real than waking reality. Many talked about the lucid dream space as a place of healing – psychologically, spiritually, and physically. Lucid dreaming was also viewed as a metaphor for living your waking life more lucidly.

It became clear from these interviews that lucid dreaming can be a very profound experience when it is integrated into a personal spiritual journey. And when lucid dreaming is brought into the psychotherapeutic process, it allows for change to take place at a very deep level of the psyche. Then, of course, there is the potential for using a lucid dream to get more deeply in touch with our creative energies.

Kira Sass has a background in cinematography and film-making, and did an incredible job with the visual imagery and aesthetics of the documentary. Obviously, she understands the lucid dream experience and how to portray it. How did she get involved in lucid dreaming?

Yes, Kira has an amazing gift for communicating through images. And since she is a lucid dreamer herself, she was able to draw directly on this personal experience to give the viewer a vivid sense of how it feels to have a lucid dream.

I don't know how Kira got involved in lucid dreaming, but we met through my weekly lucid dreaming group. Her roommate had seen one of my flyers, and both of them joined my group at the beginning of 2007.

Kira and I first collaborated on a much smaller project. One Saturday we filmed a group member's dream, involving a conversation with the recently deceased Kurt Vonnegut. We had a lot of fun on this project, and we both were excited about doing something more ambitious.

And how about you? How did you get interested in lucid dreaming?

I first learned about lucid dreaming while browsing the bookshelves of my local library as a teenager. But I didn't seriously attempt to learn to have lucid dreams until I was in my mid twenties.

At the time I was very heavily into Christianity, and lived in an extremely rough inner city neighborhood in West Baltimore. I wanted to induce a lucid dream and say the Jesus Prayer, which involves repeating the name Jesus over and over. After several months of trying, I succeeded in becoming lucid in a dream.

In the dream I was in my bedroom, which was on the basement floor of a two story apartment. I immediately floated up to the ceiling. Then, while still in the dream and lucid, I went upstairs and walked outside into my inner city neighborhood. I started saying the Jesus Prayer. It was in the middle of the night in my dream, as it was in waking life, and I became very frightened. The inner city neighborhood of my dreams conveyed a strong mood of fear. I went back inside my apartment and started heading downstairs. A loss of lucidity seemed to coincide with going down the stairs, and by the time I reached the basement, I was no longer lucid. The dream continued from this point nonlucidly, and involved the dog of my childhood appearing in my basement.

After that dream, I lost interest in lucid dreaming without thinking much about why. I got interested again six or seven years later, when my life circumstances had changed dramatically. But that first lucid dream gave me the sense that overcoming psychological blocks may have a lot to do with learning to lucid dream. This is not something I had come across in the books I had read, which focused more on the technical aspects of the popular lucid dream induction techniques.

What was it about lucid dreaming that got you so excited? Why did it seem to matter?

This is an interesting question. To me the excitement about lucid dreaming is so obvious and fundamental that it's hard to put it into words. I guess I have a general interest in things that involve the creative exploration of the imagination – theatrical improvisation, acting, film, novels, story telling. I'm also interested in psychological and spiritual growth, particularly as it relates to altered states of consciousness – neurofeedback, meditation, etc. I think lucid dreaming fits very naturally alongside these other things.

Lucid dreaming provides an opportunity for exploring the creative imagination in a very unique way. I'm reminded of the saying, "Your life is yours to create." This incredible, mysterious energy inside ourselves creates our conscious experience. Through lucid dreaming we are able to much more directly meet 'the man behind the curtain,' so to speak. I think this is an incredible opportunity because it's the dreaming imagination, the inner Wizard of Oz, that is creating the mental world that we call our lives.

Currently, you are working on a doctoral thesis on the history of lucid dreaming, right?

Yes, I am doing a dissertation on the history of lucid dreaming. Here is my basic premise: In America and Great Britain (Germany has a different history), the field of lucid dreaming evolved

out of a historical rediscovery. In the late 1960s, Celia Green and Charles Tart each wrote a book that introduced the general public to some historical documents about lucid dreaming. At the time, the concept of lucid dreaming was only known in parapsychological circles. When this forgotten historical idea, the possibility of becoming aware that you're dreaming, was reintroduced to the public, it stimulated a lot of new thinking, which eventually resulted in the creation of a new scientific field – lucid dreaming. It all started with a historical rediscovery.

The premise of my dissertation is that the historical documents introduced by Charles Tart and Celia are just the tip of a very big iceberg. Lucid dreaming has a forgotten history. Several brilliant minds explored the idea of lucid dreaming, or similar ideas, in ways that have been forgotten. If this history can be rediscovered, I believe it would have an impact that would in some ways parallel what occurred with the books of Charles Tart and Celia Green. It would introduce entirely new ways of looking at lucid dreaming.

As you investigate the history of lucid dreaming, what points have struck you as significant or deserving more attention?

The relationship between lucid dreaming and the history of the occult is already somewhat known on a general level. But the history of lucid dreaming is also closely connected to the explosion of interest in the unconscious during the time period of 1880-1914. This is the age of Freud, Jung, and others. The last two decades of the nineteenth century, the time period immediately preceding the ascendancy of Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century, is a particularly important era in lucid dreaming's history. I think the history of lucid dreaming needs to be explored within the context of its relationship to Western esotericism and the psychology of the unconscious of this time period. Lucid dreaming also has an interesting philosophical and literary history.

At the 2009 IASD Conference, you gave a talk on *The Forgotten History of Lucid Dreaming*, and mentioned the book, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History And Evolution Of Dynamic Psychiatry* by Henri Ellenberger. Briefly, what's the connection here with lucid dreaming?

Henri Ellenberger wrote what is considered the monumental classic book on the history of the unconscious. It was published almost forty years ago, but no other book before or after it comes close to matching its undisputed place as the definitive history of the discovery of the unconscious.

It is significant to the field of lucid dreaming because Ellenberger gives us precious clues into how the history of lucid dreaming is potentially relevant to contemporary times – how certain aspects of lucid dreaming's history might stimulate a lot of fresh, new thinking.

Can you give any specific examples of how Ellenberger's book provides clues to how the history of lucid dreaming may be of contemporary relevance?

A good example is what Ellenberger writes about the French Marquis Hervey de Saint-Denis. It is well known that Hervey wrote, in 1867, the first book in Western history that extensively deals with the concept of lucid dreaming. But this isn't the whole story. According to Ellenberger, Hervey's book "is one of the most extensive and thorough studies ever devoted to the author's own dreams," but is also "one of the least read books on dream literature."

Ellenberger suggests here that Hervey's book is a very serious work, but also very obscure. This makes it a prime candidate for historical research. In Ellenberger's words, "Progress is sometimes

merely the picking up of an old, abandoned idea.” As I said before, lucid dreaming’s rediscovery (by the English speaking world) in the late 1960s is a perfect example of this. The most logical place to look for these abandoned but promising ideas is in works that are important, but obscure. So we can infer from Ellenberger that it behooves the lucid dreaming community to take a second look at Hervey’s writing. Incidentally, Ellenberger also says that some of Hervey’s dreams are of “high poetic quality and beauty.”

By taking a second look at Hervey’s writings, I am talking about meticulous scholarly research. Sometimes the value of historical ideas is not immediately apparent to us from a casual reading. This is because we read through the lens of our modern perspective. Perhaps some terminology in the historical reference was being used differently than the way it is used now. Or the historical writer is operating out of hidden assumptions that differ from our own, obscuring the precise meaning. Maybe the valuable idea is intertwined with ideas that are actually outdated, resulting in dismissal by association.

Through rigorous historical research we can sometimes make the value of some abandoned, forgotten ideas understandable to the contemporary mind, stimulating exciting new directions of inquiry. Ellenberger provides an excellent starting point for this kind of historical research into lucid dreaming.

Are there other examples of the relevance of Ellenberger’s book on the unconscious to the field of lucid dreaming?

Van Eeden, the person who coined the word ‘lucid dreaming’, makes several brief but significant appearances in Ellenberger’s book. If you follow these threads by looking at other historical research, you find that Van Eeden also introduced the word ‘psychotherapy’ to the scientific world. And, it turns out, twelve years before he coined the phrase ‘lucid dreaming,’ he introduced this concept at the Fourth International Congress of Psychology. These facts suggest that the histories of lucid dreaming, psychotherapy, and psychology, are more closely intertwined than is normally supposed.

Ellenberger also talks about Frederic Myers, the author of a well known historical reference to lucid dreaming. Myers wrote that, over a span of ten years, every night, he devoted “painstaking effort” to attempting to become aware that he was dreaming. Myers is usually identified in the lucid dreaming literature as a parapsychologist. But according to Ellenberger, “Myers ... was not only a parapsychologist, but also one of the great systematizers of the notion of the unconscious mind.” This level of praise is reserved for a small group of people in Ellenberger’s book – Freud, Jung and a few others. That one of the great systems of the psychological unconscious, now largely forgotten, was created by a man so interested in lucid dreaming – this is something that I think lucid dream researchers should pay more attention to.

In your research, do you find that Freud or Jung had any knowledge of lucid dreaming, or any understanding of it?

Freud writes briefly about the concept of lucid dreaming in certain editions of his classic book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He also corresponded with Van Eeden about this topic at least once. In this letter, Freud acknowledged that lucid dreams existed, but implied they were not very important. Freud made a distinction between the latent and manifest dream content. In his view, how we experienced a dream (manifest content) was the end result of a hidden process occurring deep in the unconscious mind (latent content). The manifest content, our experience of the dream,

was not highly valued by Freud. It's significance is derived from the symbolic cues it revealed about the latent content - the mysterious unconscious dream processes.

For Freud, lucid dreaming sometimes occurred in the manifest content, but never the latent content. In other words, Freud didn't think how the dream was experienced was very important in itself, and lucidity sometimes appeared in this unimportant aspect of the dream process. So, in this letter to Van Eeden, Freud acknowledges, but trivializes lucid dreams.

On the other hand, Jacqueline Carroy has written some interesting stuff indicating that Freud was an admirer of Hervey de Saint-Denis and his lucid dreams. So Freud's attitude towards lucid dreaming is probably more complicated than his letter to Van Eeden suggests. Freud tried very hard to obtain a copy of Hervey's book, but failed. It's interesting to wonder how Hervey's book, if read by Freud, would have impacted Freud's theory of dreaming, and subsequently the entire future of twentieth century dream studies.

I am going to hold off on commenting about Jung for the time being, because anything I say may become outdated in a few months. In October of this year, for the first time, Jung's *Red Book* is going to be made available to the public. *The Red Book*, 600 pages in length, is supposed to contain a lot of material of a private nature having to do with his own personal explorations with his Active Imagination technique. Dreams play a major role in the book.

The publication of this book will be a historical milestone in the study of Jung, particular Jungian dream studies, and may significantly alter the way Jung's attitude towards dreaming is viewed. I'm hoping the book sheds light on Jung's attitude towards lucid dreaming.

So what's next for your new documentary? How do you and Kira plan to make people aware of it?

Kira and I are discovering firsthand the reality that making sure a film reaches its intended audience is as big of a project as making the film itself.

In the immediate future we will be submitting the documentary to several film festivals.

If anyone wants to purchase a copy, how would they do that?

The easiest way to purchase the film is by ordering it on our website, lucitopia.com/wakeup.