

Lucid Dreams as One Method of Replicating Components of the Near-Death Experience in a Laboratory Setting

J. Timothy Green, Ph.D.
Capistrano Beach, California

ABSTRACT: A large phenomenological overlap among lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences suggests the possibility of developing a methodology of replicating components of the near-death experience using newly developed methods of inducing lucid dreams. Reports in the literature of both spontaneous and induced near-death-experience-like episodes during lucid dreams suggest a possible protocol. Raymond Moody's (1993) use of mirror gazing is seen as a major advancement in the field of near-death studies, not only from a methodological standpoint, but also because it represents the first attempt to develop therapeutic interventions based on these experiences.

In his most recent article, Raymond Moody (1993, p. 84) stated that "I had long been intrigued with the prospect of replicating near-death experiences." He cited the movie *Flatliners* (Schumacher, 1990) as evidence of the popular fascination with this possibility. The plot of the movie develops around four medical students who induce cardiac arrest in each other in an attempt to replicate a near-death experience (NDE). While illustrating the fascination with this subject, the movie also highlighted a major ethical problem in actually doing this type of research. It would clearly be unethical to induce cardiac arrest in an attempt to replicate this experience, or for any other reason.

J. Timothy Green, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice. Reprint requests should be addressed to Dr. Green at P.O. Box 2788, Capistrano Beach, CA 92624.

However, we may be able to devise alternative methods for studying various aspects of this phenomenon that do not put subjects at any risk. Kenneth Ring (Atwater, 1988, p. viii) has pointed out that the near-death experience has nothing inherently to do with death. Although being close to death is one reliable trigger for an NDE, the experience has also been reported during such nonlethal activities as deep meditation (Grosso, 1985), ancient initiation rituals (Grosso, 1985), consciously induced out-of-body experiences (Monroe, 1971), psychedelic psychotherapy (Grof and Halifax, 1977), hypnosis (Babb, 1989) and shamanistic rituals (Eliade, 1964; Kalweit, 1988), as well as during periods of stress, during dreams (Gillespie, 1985), or even spontaneously (Bucke, 1901).

Moody has borrowed from the area of ancient initiation rituals to devise one method of replicating aspects of the near-death experience. He has also made the task less demanding by taking one component of a more complex phenomenon—in this case, seeing apparitions—and studying it in isolation.

A Modern Day Psychomanteum

Moody's article discussed his research into "one form of facilitated visionary experience, specifically crystal or mirror visions" (Moody, 1993, pp. 84). He became convinced that the ancient Greeks had developed a method by which the living could come into contact with apparitions of the dead:

Incredible as it may seem, for many centuries in ancient Greece there were institutions known as psychomanteums, or oracles of the dead, where people journeyed to consult with the spirits of the deceased. Accounts from those times make it quite clear that persons actually seemed to see and to be in direct communication with the departed during these visits. (Moody, 1993, p. 85).

Based on accounts from those times, Moody developed his own modern psychomanteum. This "theater of the mind" is located on the second floor of an abandoned mill on his property in rural Alabama. At one end of a room is a mirror 48 inches high by 42 inches wide mounted on a wall so that the lower edge is 32 inches above the floor. A comfortable chair is placed in front of the mirror with the top of the headrest 34 inches above the floor. A small lamp is placed behind the chair and the entire area is surrounded by a curtain of black velvet reaching from the ceiling to the floor. The result is that

persons looking into the mirror cannot see their own reflection, or anything else for that matter. They are looking into an empty mirror, and it is by gazing into this empty mirror that apparitions are said to appear.

Moody reported that, using this method, 12 of 25 persons, or 48 percent of those who underwent the entire procedure, and four persons who underwent a shorter version of the same procedure, experienced apparitions of dead relatives and friends. Nine of the persons who experienced these visions were male and seven female. They ranged in age from 22 to 74 and all were either students or professionals. A number of people reported not only visual contact, but also communication with the apparitions.

A few of the volunteers experienced apparitions of people other than the person they had intended to see. Moody, for instance, reported that he had intended to visit with his maternal grandmother but instead was contacted by his paternal grandmother. In three cases apparitions were seen after the person had left the psychomanteum. All of the encounters were reported to seem quite natural while they were occurring and there was no element of fear reported by any of the volunteers. The subjects unanimously reported that they felt that what they had experienced was real. Many volunteers who experienced apparitions stated that there was a definite healing or therapeutic aspect to the experience.

Moody's work represents the first time that this component of the near-death experience has been successfully isolated and studied in a laboratory setting. The question arises: Are there other components of the near-death experience that can be extracted for analysis in a laboratory setting? And are there other methods that can be used to induce the near-death experience? I would like to borrow from another area that has been documented to have produced near-death-like experiences in the past: dreams. More specifically, I would like to discuss the application of a specific type of dream, the lucid dream, as another method of inducing components of the near-death experience in a laboratory setting.

Lucid Dreams

Lucid dreams are defined quite simply as dreams in which the dreamer becomes conscious while dreaming that he or she is, in fact, dreaming. Many people who report this experience of "dream con-

sciousness" state that, once lucid, the quality of the dream changes in a manner that is difficult to describe. Often people feel an incredible sense of freedom and exhilaration at the moment they achieve lucidity.

One of my own early lucid dreams illustrates this sense of excitement and joy:

I dreamt that I had gotten off of an old whaling vessel that had just come into port after a long voyage. In my dream, I jump down off of the ship and start walking down a dirt road towards a town. As I walk, I hold both hands over my chest, one hand over the other. Suddenly, I start flying and as I do I realize for the first time that I am dreaming. I become very excited and I keep repeating, "I'm doing it, I'm doing it," meaning I am having a lucid dream. I wake up feeling incredible excitement and enjoyment.

Since the dream is a creation of the dreamer's own psyche, it stands to reason that once conscious, the dreamer can alter the dream in any way that he or she chooses. This is illustrated in the following anecdote:

I decide to practice directing the actual content of the dream. I focus on a tree in the dream scene, and I mentally command it to turn into a house. Slowly, the house appears in its place. I feel pleased with my power and progress. (Kelzer, 1987, p. 17)

There is also an incredible clarity of perception that is often reported during lucid dreams:

I am standing in a field in an open area when my wife pointed in the direction of the sunset. I looked at it and thought, "How odd; I've never seen colors like that before." Then it dawned on me: "I must be dreaming!" *Never had I experienced such clarity and perception* [italics added]—the colors were so beautiful and the sense of freedom so exhilarating that I started racing through this beautiful golden wheat field waving my hands in the air and yelling at the top of my voice, "I'm dreaming! I'm dreaming!" (LaBerge and Rheingold, 1990, p. 3).

Nor are lucid dreams simply beautiful nighttime experiences. They often can be useful in overcoming personal problems or barriers experienced in daily life. Stephen LaBerge and Howard Rheingold (1990) cited as one example of this the account of a musician who used lucid dreaming to overcome anxiety in his playing, which led directly to better performances.

But the most interesting aspect of lucid dreams is that many have an unmistakable spiritual or transcendent quality. During these

dreams the individual seems to go beyond his or her normal sense of self and experience an expanded level of consciousness not often realized during normal, waking consciousness:

I realized I was dreaming. I raised my arms and began to rise (actually I was being lifted). I rose through black sky that blended to indigo, to deep purple, to lavender, to white, then to very bright light. All the time I was being lifted there was the most beautiful music I have ever heard. It seemed like voices rather than instruments. There were no words to describe the JOY I felt. I was very gently lowered back to earth. I had the feeling that I had come to a turning point in my life and I had chosen the right path. The dream, the joy I experienced, was kind of a reward, or so I felt. It was a long, slow slide back to wakefulness with the music echoing in my ears. The euphoria lasted several days, the memory, forever. (LaBerge and Rheingold, 1990, p. 3)

The Overlap Among Lucid Dreams, Out-of-Body Experiences, and Near-Death Experiences

Celia Green, in her classic study of lucid dreams, stated:

It is not possible to discuss lucid dreams without considering their relationship to another type of experience known as an "out-of-the-body experience." Experiences of this kind occur in a wide variety of settings, the majority of these being associated with *conditions of stress, accident or illness* [italics added]. (Green, 1968, p. 17)

Green went on to illustrate this by describing the account of a person who was in a traffic accident and had an out-of-body experience. Since Green was writing before Moody's (1975) work had been published in which he coined the term "near-death experience," she did not distinguish between out-of-body experiences that occur spontaneously and those that we would now regard as one component of a near-death experience. Thus authorities in this field had made the connection not just between lucid dreams and out-of-body experiences but also between these experiences and near-death experiences.

Celia Green was not alone in making this observation. Psychologist, author, and veteran lucid dreamer Patricia Garfield made a similar observation, and also seemed to imply a developmental trend that begins with dreaming, continues with lucid dreaming, and ends in out-of-body experiences:

[While personally experimenting with dreams] . . . I had been experiencing yet another level of dream consciousness. More and more

I found myself having lucid dreams—dreams in which you become aware that you are dreaming *during* the dream. In this incredible state, anything becomes possible: flying at will, orgasm with partners of choice, calling forth creative ideas, projecting oneself into distant lands, visiting with long-dead people, and so on. *Then after months of lucid dreaming, I found myself automatically on occasion experiencing what people call out-of-body experiences* [italics added]. (Garfield, 1979, p. 13)

The association between lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences is so close, so well developed, that the question often arises as to *which* of the three experiences a particular anecdote should be classified under. For example, consider the following:

I was floating in darkness wondering what was happening to me Though I was not particularly aware . . . I felt myself drift up. Suddenly I entered the light which I happily recognized. I knew then that I was again in the presence of God, and that this time I had died. The light was brilliant and filled my vision

I did not remember . . . my life, nor did I know the circumstances of my death. I had some regrets at first, but my joy was greater than any regrets. I was spontaneously prayerful, calm and extremely happy. As I floated for some time in the light I repeated over and over with great feeling, "Thank you, Father." I was not thankful for dying, but for being in the presence of God and the light. (Gillespie, 1985, p. 80)

Many people would be quick to identify this as an example of a near-death experience. Floating in darkness, entering into a light, being in the presence of God, a sense of having died, being calm and extremely happy all are components commonly associated with a near-death experience. However, the above anecdote does not meet criteria for a near-death experience for one, and probably only one, important reason. The man who reported it was not near death; he was asleep and in the midst of a lucid dream.

This brings us back to the question central to my thesis: whether it is possible to have a near-death-like experience during a dream. Earlier in this paper I mentioned Ring's contention that the near-death experience has no inherent connection with death. LaBerge (1985) has also raised the question of whether it is theoretically possible to have the equivalent of a near-death experience under non-lethal circumstances. His answer was that this is indeed possible by experiencing it during a lucid dream.

Why Choose Lucid Dreams?

Lucid dreams lend themselves to the type of application I am suggesting for a number of reasons. As we have just seen, there is a clear, strong phenomenological overlap among lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, and near-death experiences. Another consideration is that there are no foreseeable negative consequences to participation in research involving lucid dreaming; indeed, there are some very favorable consequences to learning this technique. Dreams are, after all, a naturally occurring event, which happens many times each night. The only people who should be excluded from participation in lucid dream research are those who have difficulty with reality testing.

Another consideration is that lucid dreaming has been shown to be a teachable skill. The work of LaBerge and his colleagues (e.g., LaBerge and Rheingold, 1990) has demonstrated that anyone who is able to recall dreams, and who has sufficient motivation, is capable of learning the skill of lucid dreaming. LaBerge and Rheingold (1990) also have developed methods and technology that facilitate lucid dreaming.

A Possible Protocol

The most obvious protocol would be to have a number of veteran lucid dreamers become lucid and then will themselves to have a near-death experience. Although this has not to my knowledge been attempted in a group of people, the literature includes one account of a person who attempted this with some success.

Scott Rogo wrote a number of books in the field of parapsychology (Rogo, 1989; Rogo, 1974). He stated that, "In the past, I have succeeded in experimentally inducing out-of-body experiences (OBEs) from the hypnagogic state" (1990, p. 257). His description of the induction process clearly indicated that he used what LaBerge called the WILD method. During a nap, he reported, he had the following experience:

I tried to relax into the experience instead of "fighting" to get out of the body. That's when I suddenly found myself standing in some sort of parasomatic body on the opposite side of the room, staring back at my body. I walked or floated up to the inert figure and examined it dispassionately before thinking: "Well this is a bore. What else should I do?"

At this point in the experience, I decided to see if I could induce a classic NDE. I considered the notion practical since I can control my lucid dream environment, even though such dreams are rare in my life. I was also interested in replicating Marcel Louis Forhan's observation that he could control his out-of-body environment by pure thought (Yram, n.d.). I mention these factors to show that, while out-of body, my thought processes were not dreamlike, but perfectly rational.... Then I commanded myself to undergo an NDE.

The scene instantly changed. The neighborhood didn't change in its appearance, but became drab and rather oppressive, as if I were looking at a sepia-tinted photograph of it. The sky and stars seemed to disappear and a large tunnel opened in the sky, taking up roughly 30 degrees of my visual field. I soon found myself flying down the tunnel, which seemed to be sepia colored like the rest of the environment, toward a glowing light. I could see and sense the intensity and warmth of the light, and I marveled at the experience. I knew that I shouldn't be capable of staring into something so bright nor tolerate the intense heat I felt, but I could, which encouraged me to try merging with the light. I continued my way through the tunnel.

I was nearing the light when I lost control of the experience, or control was taken from me. My OBE/NDE environment began to fade and I had the sensation of being sucked back through the tunnel. Everything went black as I felt myself swirling down a maelstrom. I realized that I was returning to my body. (Rogo, 1990, p. 258)

The out-of-body experience, dispassionately looking at his body, moving rapidly down a tunnel, seeing a bright light, trying to merge with the light and being sucked back through a dark area are all familiar components of the NDE.

It is important to note that Rogo indicated this experience was unlike a typical NDE in one important aspect: the sense of peace, calm and painlessness, which Ring (1980) called the core affective cluster, was clearly absent.

Conclusion

The possibility of developing a methodology that would allow us to induce a near-death like experience in a laboratory or naturalistic setting is indeed fascinating. Moody's replication of a modern psychomanteum to induce apparitions has already produced intriguing results and promises to continue do so in the future. I have presented another method that I believe also holds promise of replicating com-

ponents of the near-death experience. Lucid dreams have long been known to produce transcendental, near-death-like experiences.

We also have the opinions of leading experts in the fields of both near-death studies and lucid dreaming who feel that this is theoretically possible. Although this has yet to be demonstrated in a laboratory setting, there is at least one report in the literature suggesting that this is not only possible, but has actually occurred with some success, in a naturalistic setting. I see no major obstacles, either methodological or ethical, to developing a protocol to carry out this research in a laboratory setting in the near future.

Moody, who ushered in the present day field of near-death studies, has again blazed a trail for the rest of us to follow. The method of isolating one component of the near-death experience for laboratory study marks a major advancement in the field of near-death studies. We have now reached the point where we can go beyond simply documenting this phenomenon, which has now been done exhaustively, to being able to replicate the experience in a controlled environment, thereby allowing for a more scientific examination of the experience.

But this is also seen as a major advancement in a more important sense. We are now in a position to begin to develop actual therapeutic interventions based on this research, which promise to be of direct and profound benefit to mankind.

This brings us to the prospect articulated by Melvin Morse (Morse and Perry, 1990, p. 174): "Imagine if the transformative reaction to NDEs could be available to anyone who wants the power to change his life for the better." Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1978) noted that children dying of cancer often spontaneously have these experiences and that the experiences seem to ease their transition into death. Could people who were terminally ill be taught to have this experience, thereby easing their transition into death, while at the same time enhancing the quality of the time they have left? What about the parents of a child who has died suddenly? Could we use Moody's method of mirror gazing to grant them one last visit with their child, thereby alleviating some of their otherwise unbearable grief?

What if we were able to provide criminals with a life review during which they were given the opportunity to evaluate their lives? Would seeing how their actions affected others have an impact on their subsequent behavior? If we were able to develop a methodology that allowed people to enter into and communicate with the light, would it be important for our religious leaders to undergo the experience? Could our scientists be exposed to the sense of all knowledge that

some near-death experiencers encounter? These are just a few of the possible applications that come to mind.

In all cultures throughout history there have been those who knew about these experiences and sought them out. This is, of course, what many of the ancient initiation and shamanistic rituals did, using not only mirror gazing, but also hypnotic techniques, mood-altering drugs, sensory and social isolation, dreams, and a number of other techniques, in order to facilitate this experience (Eliade, 1964; Grosso, 1985). And although these were often closely guarded secret rites in the past, we may have arrived at the point in history where these experiences can be made available to anyone who is in need of them.

In a similar vein, although it once took a lifetime of dedication to achieve these experiences, it may be that by combining the wisdom of the ancients with advances in modern technology we may be able to induce this experience more rapidly and effectively. And while we are now at the point where we need to isolate individual components for research purposes, the day may come in the not too distant future, when we are able to recombine these components into one overall modern-day method of transcendence.

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