

DreamSpeak

An Interview With Ryan Hurd

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Questions by Robert Waggoner

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<http://www.dreamstudies.org>.

Tell us about your early dream life.

I was a precocious dreamer as a kid. I'm thankful my mother paid attention to her dreams and always asked about my nightly adventures. I was about six years old when I had my first conscious dream experience. I was having trouble falling asleep so I learned how to close my eyes and focus my vision in the middle of my visual field. After a while, I'd start seeing colored lights and if I kept with it, the lights would become a swirling vortex that would envelop me. I'd go into the vortex and then be asleep. I wasn't trying to be lucid; I was just trying to fall asleep, and the method worked well.

Other than that, the biggest influence on my early dream life was when I saw *Poltergeist* at the movie theater with my young friend and his dad – I was seven. We were supposed to see *E.T.* but it was sold out. That movie scared the bejesus out of me (as we say in the south) and for *months* afterwards I had to go to sleep with the light on, the door open, and my parents practically in view. That movie affected me deeply and was the source of countless nightmares later on. Scary clowns!

What do you recall of your first lucid dream?

My first truly lucid dream, as I remember it, was much later, when I was twelve or thirteen. A seething monster explodes from a television set and I realized "this is a dream and only a dream." The thought gave me the power to face the monster, which quickly evaporated.

What did you make of that? How did it touch you?

I was ecstatic. This was a great success for me, standing up for myself in the dream, the sacred *no*, as Nietzsche would say. This was during a time that I was finding my voice in the waking world as well; middle school was a rough experience; there were a lot of stabbings and violence and I was the quiet guy who survived by being invisible. The dream gave me a sense of power and showed me that I could face my fears and have a voice.

How did your lucid dreaming progress? Any unexpected lucid dreams?

Well, interestingly enough, my first wet dream was also a lucid dream. That was pretty unexpected. It was rewarding to have a “safe place” to explore my sexuality and fantasies in my dreams. I also began to quest actively for God. In one surprising dream, I blasted up into the sky, through the clouds and yelled “Show yourself!” Then I saw a bearded white guy in flowing robes sitting on a cloud above me. He leaned forward, looked into my eyes and said, “HA!” I woke up startled and then I got the joke; I had long ago rejected this sort of personal God. I love how that dream poked fun at my crude attempt to seek answers.

Since this issue features flying lucid dreams, have you had any unusual ones?

Flying dreams: is there a more perfect expression of freedom? They are a blessing. Early on flying was my primary lucid goal. The nature of intention really shines through in this practice, as every lucid dreamer knows what happens when the motivation is scattered: either you can't get off the ground or the flight is erratic. I'm aware there are still psychologists who suggest that flying dreams are emblematic of the “escapism” that lucid dreaming can promote. I can't take their admonishments too seriously, especially if they haven't experienced the wind in their hair for themselves.

However, sometimes the critique has merit. One surprising lucid dream had me climbing out of a window to get away from some old elementary school bullies. I just wanted to fly, forget about their drama. But when I tried to fly, I could only make it to a treetop. The flight was definitely “against the wind.” I had a moment of greater clarity and wondered what would happen if I tried to fly in the general direction of my adversaries, instead of away from them. I jumped up, and to my surprise, I launched into the air with great speed, and landed directly next to the bullies! We sat down together and became friends. When I woke up, I realized that the power to fly comes from the relationship of “my” will to the dreamscape; it's not atomistic; there has to be some synergy.

In an article published in *Electric Dreams* (April 2006; # 16-4), you wrote, “*There is soul in dreamwork, but only when the dream is approached like a bottomless well. For me, this work sometimes comes in the form of spontaneous lucid dreams. They are unbidden, and can be terrifying.*” At what point did lucid dreams become frightening or overwhelming?

Given my early horror-movie trauma as well my sensitive nature, it's not too surprising that the primary lucidity trigger for my early lucid dreams was the experience of anxiety, strife, or terror. I experienced many full-on lucid nightmares as a teenager and young adult. Looking back, I can see that my first test in lucid dreaming was to move beyond that “sacred no” to the “sacred yes!” or the exuberance of being aware in the dream without fear. But it's been a fitful journey.

I am now convinced that spontaneous lucid dreams come with a challenge embedded in the dreamscape, but when I was in my teens and twenties, I was more interested in seeking experience than receiving knowledge. It was during this period that I had what I guess you could call a “spiritual opening.” The lucid dreams were frequent – several a week – and often emotionally charged. I dove head-on into the terror of consciousness in order to get it “out of my system.” But that's not really the way it works. I think I was hurting myself.

There is very little in the lucid dreaming literature about negative experiences, but people talk about it to me in private, so I know that my experience is not that unique. It was during this period that I let myself be killed in the dream countless times, torn apart by animals, electrocuted,

stabbed, beheaded, disemboweled.... My favorite was cliff-diving. So, consciousness and terror were often intertwined for me at this stage. I tried to find spiritual guidance to no avail. I was also reading LaBerge by now, but his “do anything you want; you’re in control” message didn’t seem to apply to my process. I didn’t want to *get control*; I wanted to know what was at the bottom of the horror.

What was at the bottom?

Only more horror. As it turns out, the bottomless well can go anywhere; it can be a pathway to knowledge or lead to greater suffering. Eventually I had to look away. I should mention that, mixed in with these unusual dreams were also many experiences of joy, ecstasy and safe places where I could trust myself and my dreams. Carl Jung calls these *temenos* or meeting grounds, and finding these safe grounds inside myself was the outcome of that hard work. I now believe that lucid nightmares have their own wisdom, and don’t consider them to be “failures” in the sense that I lost control.

How did these intense experiences affect your waking life?

Well, I think they defined my next series of life choices. When I couldn’t find a teacher or mentor who understood what I was going through, I just retreated from the trials – those botched initiations as I consider them now – and sought more stable realities. I needed to be grounded. I was already an anthropology major in college, so I dove into the discipline of archaeology, which is as close to the earth as one can get in academia.

I spent two years analyzing prehistoric pottery fragments and then, after graduation, went on the road as a field archaeologist. I dug a lot of trenches for science, excavating historic ruins, ancient Native American villages, and sites like railroad camps from the 19th century. This material grounding was crucial. While I focused on middle earth, so to speak, the labyrinth of dreams slipped away and let me rest awhile.

Looking back, did you wonder if you had approached lucid dreaming inappropriately somehow – or that lucid dreaming was inherently destabilizing?

Lucid dreaming was destabilizing *for me*. In retrospect, I think I had a hard time because I didn’t have an active psychospiritual practice, and I also didn’t have a teacher or a real community I could turn to for support.

Also, I think my view of lucid dreaming was inadequate for the territory I was exploring. My default perspective was *schema theory*, which, in my opinion, tends to suck the soul out of the dreamscape by abstracting it all to linguistic constructs. I now think about dreaming as being multi-dimensional; the linguistic layer is only one level of metaphor at work. This is Harry Hunt’s work and it fits my experience. Dreaming is a meeting ground – who or what we are meeting is an open question as far as I am concerned.

I now think that the meta-paradigm (or model of reality) we carry into the dream actually constructs the boundaries of what is or is not possible. This is Fariba Bogzaran’s teachings, too: that our core belief systems influence our experiences, laying the framework. But to say that the construction of our dreams is primarily linguistic is to deny the strong bodily, emotional and transcendent qualities of the dreaming world - including those anomalies of the Western mind such as synchronicity, telepathy and clairvoyance. I don’t think lucid dreaming is inherently destabilizing, but I do believe that it is inherently radical. It certainly shakes things up.

Were you raised in a religious environment?

I'd say it was a humanist environment. I was raised in the Unitarian Universalist Church, which allows for a personal search of meaning, even if that personal search may end up including non-Christian viewpoints such as Buddhism, existentialism, or even paganism. It was a very flexible religious education but I never had to make a choice or embody a choice through practice.... So as a teenager I was very much in the postmodern predicament of being up Shit Creek without a paddle. I didn't know what I believed, and when I went looking later on, I mostly found my worst fears, which tend to be very dualistic and concerned with good and evil.

In your view, what characterizes a healthy and an unhealthy approach to lucid dreaming?

I think my journey with lucid dreaming was unhealthy at times. In my case, when I found myself suddenly confronting powerful unconscious material without being really grounded in the waking world, my ego defenses kicked in and I simply lost interest in lucid dreaming for a while. This is why we have defenses. That's good and healthy.

My guess is that a similar process happens to many beginner lucid dreamers who are jazzed to manipulate the dreamworld only to find that the tricks only last for a while, and soon enough other "material" starts oozing out of the woodwork. That beginners' luck runs out for some of us, those whom have "thinner boundaries" as Ernest Hartmann says. The publishing world capitalizes on this process, unwittingly, as there's always fresh dreamers to keep the introductory books in print, but little advice out there for more practiced lucid dreamers. That's why the LDE is such a crucial forum.

But I don't want to tell people how they should or shouldn't dream. Lucid dreaming has been shown to have a lot of individual variation even in the same culture. For me personally, an unhealthy approach is when I am more interested in my own consciousness (and my clever knowing of my knowing) rather than the dream itself. As you like to say, Robert, lucid dreamers are dream naturalists. I'm usually interested in what the dreams want to offer up in the moment, not what tasks I can impose on them from the waking world. I consider this a naturalistic approach to lucid dreaming.

However, I also occasionally engage in lucid dream incubations, and have generally found that if my intention is clear then the dream is more than willing to meet me where I stand. I think Clare Johnson's work with lucid dreaming and creative writing is an excellent example of this.

What signs would need to occur to you to advise someone to step away from lucid dreaming?

Well, if those normal ego defenses aren't doing the trick (such as natural disinterest, and cessation of lucid dreaming) I recommend seeing a counselor, a mentor or a spiritual advisor who is trusted and who also has experience working in this realm. Depression, isolation, the use of drugs and alcohol for coping are commonly accepted symptoms of inner work that could be grounded in good, ole consensual reality and real human support.

Some people would say, “Well, I have been a lucid dreamer for ten years, and have lots of fun, do experiments, spiritual stuff, sexual stuff and fly around exploring. I hardly ever have anything scary appear. When I do, I normally point a finger at it and blast it away with a ball of energy.” What would you say to a lucid dreamer like that?

I'd say: Welcome to California. Seriously, this is *exactly* how I first approached my lucid dreams. You're in the safe zone with this attitude; it's probably the way to go if you're on your own. The dream ego has proven to be quite effective at minimizing contact with unsavory scenerios in lucid dreams. I'll discuss this more later. Ultimately, I would argue that, armed with this paradigm alone, opportunities for transformation are being missed. But, then again, transformation isn't everybody's bag. I'm a strong believer in cognitive freedom; it's your mind, shape it as you will.

Would you also suggest that the lucid dreamer, once lucid, would obtain a richer experience in dealing with shadow elements, as opposed to just the joyful and numinous elements?

Yes. But my experience also suggests that *seeking out* the shadow elements can be masochistic. Not to worry; if you're open and receptive, the shadowy elements will come on their own.

Unfortunately, there is a taboo against “negative” or “dark night of the soul” experiences in the West. Psychologist and wilderness guide Bill Plotkin speaks about this eloquently in his book *SoulCraft*. When we refuse to face dark truths or the experience of suffering, we've essentially barred ourselves from a third of the cosmos, known in many cultures as the underworld. Plotkin says as a culture, we love to go up, towards transcendence and bliss, but hate to go down, into the earth and the realm of the dead. This is why lucid nightmares have something to tell us.

Since “shadow elements” is a Jungian term, I'll conclude with one of Jung's own parables for psychospiritual growth: To get from the top of the mountain to the next mountain peak, we have to head down into the valley in between. The higher the highs, the lower the lows. So to cultivate a more authentic relationship with the dreamscape, facing my fears and undergoing various trials – as they manifest themselves - are a necessary part of the journey. But I've also found that this work leads to even greater joys, ecstasy and wisdom along the way.

So after a five-year hiatus, you returned to dreaming and the occasional spontaneous lucid dream. How did you now approach lucid dreams? Could you share a lucid dream from this period?

When I was 27, the lucid dreams came back. I was living on the road, still doing contract archaeology. My attitude in the dream was more *wary*, sort of like a teenager after that first fender-bender. Suddenly I started paying more attention to the street signs. In general, I participated more fully in the dream. I flew less and stayed put more. I didn't try to prolong the lucidity. I was more relaxed in the lucid dreamscape, and more receptive. I didn't have an agenda. Very different from the *seek and destroy* of my early twenties. But I was also still having the occasional lucid nightmare. So, I knew I still needed to find a teacher and began the slow search for someone who could work with me.

Here is a short lucid dream from those days that captures this turning point.

1/2/02 I'm in a living room, alone at night. A bristling fear is present as I turn the TV on, and that fuzzy heaviness that often accompanies a bad dream. A clock or timer on the TV screen shows its 4am. I think “that is impossible,” because soon before it was much earlier. “This is a

dream,” I decide. I walk outside on to the front porch and look at the trees and a nearby field, lit by a low, golden light. I feel much better, peaceful. I walk back inside, lucidity already fading...

In your article in *Electric Dreams* (April 2006; # 16-4), you express a concern for the “domination of the analytical mind in the dream.” You continue: “ ‘Lucid’ comes from the Latin word *lucē* — light —and after-all, it is the nature of light to banish the shadows. And it is the shadows from whom we learn the most in dreams.” Do you feel that lucidity naturally does away with the shadow elements? Or does the analytical mind in the lucid dream state seem predisposed to avoid shadow elements? Or both?

This is a tough one; I’ve been working on this problem for three years now and have ended up with a fairly radical critique of the Western culture of lucid dreaming. Clearly the analytical mind affects the dream. Reason is the Western blind spot, our default way of thinking, so it’s hard to see the construct. But Reason is aggressive by its very nature – Philosopher Christian DeQuincey writes at length about this, and I think the damaging effects of misguided reason are visible in our lucid dreaming experiences. When expanded self-consciousness is confused to be reason (ie *lucidity* by many scholars definitions), the dream is quickly subjected to a rational splice and dice that leaves little room for the dreamscape to express itself. I have noticed how many times I have shut down a dream scene just by the thought “this is *only* a dream.”

In my experience, when I bring in a waking world goal, I am risking a squashing of the dream’s own process, simply because I am in two places at once. I’m thinking, “It seems like I’m here but *really* I’m sleeping in my bed at home and my social security number is...” This is what the rational mind does in the dream by default; the *ratio* is a juxtaposition, a fraction. And we become fractured. So self-awareness tied to a Western sense of “this is not real” devalues the dream by preventing the magical blending of subject/object that is really the *distinguishing characteristic* of dreaming.

The worst part: Reason effectively stomps on emotional and intuitive ways of knowing without us even knowing it’s happening. It’s the water we swim in, an artifact of the West’s dominant cultural model. That’s also why I think the misnomer of “controlling your dreams” continues to stick to lucid dreaming: it’s practically hardwired in our Western psyches. We run the risk of becoming Conquistadors of Consciousness because this way of thinking really has colonialism and also the domination of nature at its roots. That’s why dream characters, especially the shady ones, don’t want to hear about how they are parts of myself that haven’t been integrated yet – in fact, this generally pisses them off.

So, for me, I have been trying to relearn how to think and be in the dream. It’s not about being illogical, but learning a different *kind* of logic so I can meet the dream more authentically. Ed Kellogg’s work with phenomenology and dream magic applies here; he is a master of moving within the magical realism of the dreamscape.

So I don’t think that lucidity destroys the dream by its very nature, as some depth psychologists claim. It’s Reason that is the problem, not self-awareness. Reason is only a tool, after all, and it has its uses. However, in my dreamworld, those shadow elements make contact only when I’ve put my “dayworld” tools away. But to argue that consciousness is *tainting* the dream doesn’t make sense to me. How can we taint our own experience?

As someone with a deep interest in anthropology, does there seem to be an ancestral way of approaching lucid dreaming?

This is new territory for me, but I have been exploring the potential of tapping into ancestral knowledge through the imagery that emerges in dreams. It is certainly true that we can explore our families of origin through lucid dreams; again, I strongly recommend a guide for this level of work.

What also may be possible is a deeper ancestral connection, perhaps tied to our bloodlines or through ancestral landscapes. I am indebted to other cultures that work with their dreams in this way. Lee Irwin's work *Dreamseekers* is an amazing window into how the Plains Indians incubate visions that integrate ecology and healing. Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock has also published a fascinating account about a Mayan dream vision that helped bring together a community in order to fight invading forces. The ancestors are often guiding forces behind these powerful dreams.

For me, as an Anglo-European descendent, the dreaming path of my ancestors is largely unknown, despite all the records we kept along the way. Dreaming as ancestral work is new to me, but already it is healing my disconnection, as well as helping me connect with the landscape where I live now.

Tell us about how “reverence” could be experienced in a lucid dream? How does a lucid dream of reverence differ from the more common approaches to lucid dreaming, i.e., explore, have fun, ask questions, seek challenges, etc.

Reverence is a strong word and I don't like to throw it around all the time. A lighter way to describe this attitude is one of gratitude and thanksgiving. Giving thanks is important in ritual thinking in many cultures, and also the cornerstone of doing any kind of nature awareness work in the waking world.

I'm not talking about worshipping dream characters. It's also not about becoming powerless or destroying the ego; that dream ego is really important, no matter what role my subjective self is playing out in the dream. Furthermore, becoming powerless in the dream is still playing within confines of the conquest of reason; except now rather than squashing dream characters, *I'm* the one being squashed. That's usually no good.

Instead, I try to cultivate *gratitude* for the visions I'm graced with. Reverence, as a stronger sense of gratitude, is an deep understanding that I am facing something – an idea, a memory, or a situation – that is undoubtedly more powerful than I. We are part of something bigger. Recognizing that fact is an act of reverence. Respond in this fashion, from the heart, and new doorways of experience will certainly open up.

I believe that these sorts of experiences are self-selecting; it's not a trick or a tactic in the usual sense. Having respect for the dream also does not mean you can't have fun or enjoy the experience of being lucid; in fact, it's a *deepening* of joy and enjoyment because now we are treating the world *as if it is real*. This is really an existential viewpoint about exuberance and responsibility being wrapped around each other like a double-helix.

Here's a dream from two years ago that really made all these ideas real for me: *I'm walking outside and realize I'm dreaming. The path has opened up – it is very grey outside, foggy, maybe a slight rain or mist. I concentrate on my walking, the feel of my shoes on the pavement, which is old and gritty. Then, there is a tree in front of me, a large hardwood like an Oak. I am overjoyed*

and filled with love/reverence/awe. I approach it and it changed as I continue to look, shrinking into a gnarly shape with a bulbous trunk and spindly limbs, like an old fruit tree in winter. I am in front of the tree and I thank it for blessing me. I am crying, a mixture of sadness and thankfulness. The tree is steady and exudes a character of grace and... royalty. Benign leadership? It is still stately, but open to me.

As you have explored ancient rock art in Central America, the images seemed to have really touched you. Does this interest in ancient figures and ancient places show up in your lucid dreaming?

Oh yeah, archaeology and lucid dreaming are really two expressions of the same desire for me; to uncover what was previously hidden from view. This is the nature of consciousness, and of lucidity as I know it. The intuitive sensing in dreamwork and the analytical thinking in archaeology actually complement each other well, creating a multi-dimensional approach to reality. My graduate work at JFK University has largely focused on this issue. Indeed, I consider lucid dreaming a valid scientific methodology.

When I was in the field in Nicaragua, I incubated lucid dreams about prehistoric rock art to uncover my biases and reveal my own worldview so I could “see” the rock art more clearly. What surprised me is that this practice actually led to *new insights* about the ancient carvings as well. Perceptual anomalies were revealed in my dreams that loosened me up enough to notice them in the field, in the waking world. And if I ever get back to Nicaragua, I have some new hypotheses to test.

Here’s an example of a dream from this period: *I enter a thick, completely dark space, falling steadily and slowly... I wonder what will emerge and remind myself not to expect anything. There is a texture of sound, rich deep tones or vibrations, some heavier tingling and no light whatsoever. Then, thin white filaments of light emerge in a loose cluster in the center of my vision. These lights are curlique filaments that slowly shift around as if suspended in a medium. They shift about and change lengths and curl about languidly. I have the thought that this resembles the long meanders of some rock art, but made of light and three-dimensional.*

This dream reveals biases in my thinking about some rock art design’s similarity to visionary imagery, which is a very attractive theory to me. But also the strange perception of “vibrations” emerges. As it happened, I experienced similar deep-toned vibrations at a rock art site only 4 days later. I finally realized that the cicada calls in the jungle (similar to crickets) were echoing off the rocks and creating an intense field of vibration. Earlier, I thought it was a mosquito! This insight highlights the possibility that the ancient people of Nicaragua may have selected rock art sites for their acoustic properties. So lucid dreaming can add context as well as the potential of fresh insight to any phenomenon being studied.

This reminds me of an interesting lucid dream in which I told the dream to take me someplace I should be – so, at the end of various interesting dreams, I decided to fly to the stars in the night sky, but as I do so, the stars begin to rush together to form numerous golden lit geometric symbols – interlocking rings, triangles, figures that seemed both spiritual and expressive. Totally unexpected. What do you think about these experiences of “sacred geometry” in the lucid dream state?

I love these experiences, but I’m not really sure what to think of them. Some psychologists say that abstract geometric imagery is the root of human thought. In Islam, this sort of imagery is considered to be sacred, related to the divine Intellect (of which reason is but a one-dimensional imitation). Others argue that it is simply a product of our optic structures.

But I do know this: in my dreams, this class of imagery is the first thing to emerge from imageless dreams. Those cosmic dots, light-filled spheres, latticework, mandalas and spirals bloom out of the center of my visual field with dogged persistence. And if I follow the imagery and put my intention behind it, the imagery becomes a vortex that wraps around my dreambody and invites me in. So whatever it is, Robert, and wherever it came from, I consider that geometry of light to be a portal. Ah, but to where?

I really want to thank you for your observations and sharing your experiences. Any parting thoughts or suggestions to those new to lucid dreaming?

I just want to reach out to beginning lucid dreamers to honor their fears rather than squashing them from the get-go. Also, make sure to discuss with others what didn’t work so well in the dream. We’re still *just beginning* to map out the potentials of lucid dreaming and every dreamer is a scientist in this regard. Lastly, if you find yourself in some of the terrain I have discussed here, find a mentor who can help when the going gets tough. Lucid dreaming can become a life-long practice, so take it slow and easy. There’s plenty of time to experience all that the world of lucid dreaming has to offer.

Thanks, Robert, for the opportunity to tell my story. I’d like to close with a quote from Nietzsche, who is believed to have been a prolific lucid dreamer:

“And perhaps many a one, like myself, recollect having sometimes called out cheerily and not without success amid the dangers and terrors of dream life: “It is a dream! I will dream on!”