

Transcending Limitations: Spontaneous Paranormal and Spiritual Experiences in Australian Daily Life.

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Summary

Australians, not unlike other Western cultures, have pr aternatural experiences considerably more often than they are willing to speak of them. A recent study of spontaneous experiences in Australians reveals that there are common personality factors and triggering mechanisms underlying these apparently random encounters. It is further suggested that these experiences are part of the selective pressure of human evolution and they should therefore be studied in order to provide greater access to the process of social and personal renewal which seems to follow such encounters.

"The feeling of "oneness" and incredible order in the universe and [the feelings of] euphoria [which come] with it has happened just out of the blue with no wanting many times. I remember one incident when I was washing up! Suddenly, every action took on a special meaning and somehow fitted into a higher order or unity."

"I think I have become aware of the presence of 'God' since in certain stressful times I may close my eyes and feel myself going deep within and everything is dark and quiet. Twice when I have done this, outward circumstances have changed, as if someone understood and intervened."

"The day before my 21st birthday - in the middle of crashing a car which had gone out of control, with no control in the wheel, flying through the air, I saw, and felt two hands placed over mine on the wheel, and the wheel was WRENCHED around to the other direction. The hands were greenish white, very strong, old man's hands, with gnarled knuckles and raised semi-lunar valves. The sleeves were caftan-like, and disappeared into nothingness. The other occupant of the car also had his hands on the wheel, and felt the strength of the wrench, but did not see the hands. Neither of us in the car were hurt. I had the mental message at the time it happened; 'Not yet. You have much more to learn.' I have been doing my best to learn ever since." (13)

The above descriptions are some typical examples of what can be called pr aternatural experiences. These include, among others, mystical, visionary and paranormal encounters. To those who have them, these experiences have an extraordinary

power and often lead to a transformation of life style, renewed capacity to cope with daily life and a belief in life as meaningful, purposeful and worthwhile (10). Tasks which once seemed difficult and/or impossible are no longer insurmountable and relationships with self and others seem to take on new depth and positive qualities.

A study was conducted three years ago, by this author, exploring the occurrence and mechanism of pr aternatural experiences amongst ordinary Australians (12). It was surprising to learn that these encounters are common occurrences in the lives of a good many Australians. At first thought, this may seem quite strange - how do such extraordinary events arise in a population of quite ordinary people? Assuming most of these people were normal (and according to psychological tests they were), what are the mechanisms, psychological and social, which lead ordinary folk onto the road to Damascus, as it were? Further, we might ask, as did the eminent zoologist Sir Alister Hardy FRS, do these experiences serve some progressive purpose in the evolutionary scheme of things (6)?

The object of the aforementioned research project was therefore threefold. First, to see what a casual survey at two Queensland Universities would reveal as to the frequency of occurrence and variety of types of experiences, second, to find the common psychological and social mechanisms which tend to trigger these encounters in people who

were not necessarily seeking them, and, third, to explore what role, if any, these experiences play in human development.

It was interesting to discover that more than eighty percent of the respondents to a non-random survey reported a wide variety of these types of experiences. These include: 1) encounters with God, 2) introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences, 3) encounters with the numinous and/or sacred, 4) near death encounters of a 'spirit realm', 5) visionary episodes, 6) sensing of non-corporeal presences, 7) out-of-body-experiences, 8) remote perceptions (pre- and post-cognitions and telepathy), 9) a sudden sense of ontological uncertainty or loss of a sense of 'existential self' and 10) shamanistic-like 'other-world' adventures (13). Although we cannot conclude from this sort of non-random survey that eighty percent of the Australian population has had religious and/or paranormal experiences, it would not seem unreasonable to assume, based on the results of this study, that Australians are not unlike their British and American counterparts. In those countries Gallup and similar polls indicate that better than forty percent, or two in five, of the ordinary population claim to have had one or more of these experiences in a lifetime (2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 20, 21).

Considering how reticent most Australians are to admit to such events, much less talk about them, it is no wonder that pr aternatural experiences appear to be rare. However, this more recent research in Australia, Britain, Iceland, Sweden and the USA indicates that these encounters with another dimension of human reality are more common than previously believed and it is a willingness to voluntarily speak of them which

is extraordinary, rather than the experiences themselves.

When asked by a non-judgemental and sympathetic interviewer, many Australians readily launch into their stories of intense transformative experience. However, these recollections are often prefaced with the statement: "I have never told anyone this before because I was afraid that my family and friends would think I'm batty, but..." and so the story would begin.

The stories ranged from minor premonitions which later occurred, to out-of-body experiences, to visions, to encounters with non-corporeal forces or presences, divine or otherwise, to full blown mystical experiences in which there was a dissolution of personal self and a merging with what was felt to be the 'ultimate ground of being', 'truth', or God (4). After listening to almost two hundred of these interesting tales the question remained as to whether there were some hidden common psychological threads which could provide a clue as to why, seemingly at random, people have these experiences without apparently seeking them in any conscious way.

By using a computerised questionnaire developed specifically for this purpose followed by the application of some sophisticated statistical techniques,¹ a pattern emerged out of the apparent randomness of events and circumstances surrounding the experiences (15).

First, there appears to be a cluster of predisposing personality factors which seem to make some individuals more likely to have

¹These included principal components analysis followed by direct multivariate discriminant function analysis of the extracted components and personality variables.

præternatural experiences than others (14). Such people are high in a factor called 'Absorption', which is the capacity to enter wholly and completely into whatever they are doing (9, 18). Such individuals tend not to notice time passing and when watching a movie, for example, they so lose themselves that they feel they are actually in the scene they are witnessing. In other words, these individuals are extremely good at suspending the scrutiny of self-monitoring in a way which leads to a more total participation in what they do.

Another important personality factor which facilitates præternatural experiences is the possession of a higher than average level of a positive emotional activation or a high level of 'positive affectivity' (22). Associated with this higher level of 'positive affectivity' is a greater sense of well-being and confidence which permeates all aspects of the individual's life.

This increased confidence probably leads to the other major cluster of personality factors which seem to underlie the occurrence of præternatural experiences: reduced conformity to traditional ideas, less emotional constraint and a higher capacity for risk-taking. In other words, these præternaturally prone individuals are more willing to stand apart from the mainstream and are less constrained emotionally and interpersonally. However, this lessened conformity and greater interpersonal expansiveness may be a by-product of the experiences themselves, although it is most likely that one leads to the other in a self-reinforcing cycle.

Given the necessary 'personality setting,' what actually triggers the experiences in question? The most prominent triggering

circumstance is the presence of a fairly high level of stress which has been on-going prior to the præternatural experience in question. In order to trigger the experience, however, this background of emotional tension must be silenced by entering into a deep, absorbed concentration (such as listening intently to music) in the context of being socially isolated while simultaneously relinquishing a fair degree of emotional control (i.e., letting go of whatever it is one is emotionally fixated on at the time). If these conditions are further punctuated by a sense of relief from the stressful situation, which suddenly appears as if from nowhere, then one may find oneself enmeshed in some form of the præternatural.

From this description it appears as though the triggering activities are factors which merely accentuate the required background personality qualities. The underlying mechanism can thus be conceived of as a sudden switch into an altered state and away from one's usual consciousness as these background personality traits are pushed beyond their usual limits. When this happens, our day to day conscious state, with its ordinary perceptions and awarenesses, is disrupted and replaced by another consciousness 'state' with its associated altered reality frame. This other 'state' can be thought of as an entrance into a radically different perceptual world in which the objects, feelings and thoughts usually experienced take on new perspectives, meanings and frames of reference (16, 17).

From this new perspective the world is experienced as radically different. So different, in fact, that these experiences often lead those who have them to a total reevaluation of their behaviour and

circumstances. Whether or not an individual uses a specifically religious format to describe and understand his/her experience, the experience often leads to a religious-like conversion.

The Australian research reveals that genuinely religious interpretations are construed from these experiences only slightly less than non-religious ones (13). It has been argued that the nature of the interpretation given to an experience probably depends on an individual's background and beliefs existing *prior* to the occurrence of an encounter (11). On the other hand, many of the specifically non-religious interpretations of praternatural experiences still contain a quasi-religious element in which the experient reinterprets what s/he believes to be 'ultimately real'. This ontological reassignment may not directly include notions of the divine, but will often represent a major change in perspective about 'self' in relation to world as well as new ideas concerning the nature of reality.

However, it is when these experiences are religiously interpreted that they are most likely to lead to changes in lifestyle and outlook. The most common understanding arising as part of a praternatural encounter is that we are all 'one,' as seen in the first example at the beginning of this paper. This is not a mere sophomoric speculation concerning our 'ultimate nature', but, rather, a profound and immediate existential awareness of the fact that we are, metaphorically speaking, all in the same 'boat' riding the waves of the ocean together. This awareness often leads to a greater empathetic connection to people, animals, plants and even inanimate objects. Naturally, such a direct awareness often leads to a renewed and more open dialogue with

others and, thus, to a greater potential for solving problems.

It is observed by experients who have had religious-type praternatural encounters that once they feel they have communicated with the 'larger reality', it is easier to connect harmoniously and effectively with the mundane day to day world we all inhabit most of the time. This new communication appears to be not only interpersonal, but intrapersonal as well. Thus, a new clearer 'inner' communication becomes the basis for a renewed creativity which can express itself interpersonally, religiously, or in endeavours ranging from composing music, to designing new and more powerful computers, to conducting bio-medical research.

The need for altered state experiences in the creative process, such as medical research, is illustrated by the work of Otto Loewi who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936 for his discovery that heart rate was chemically mediated by a substance generated at nerve endings (1). One night Loewi awakened from a dream at 3 a.m. in which he had been in his laboratory watching two frog hearts, one beating above the other, while liquid ran over the first down onto the one below. He wrote the dream down, but was unable to read it in the morning. The very next night the dream repeated and, awakening at the same hour, he immediately went to his laboratory to attempt to repeat the dreamed experiment. By 5 a.m. he had found that stimulating the nerve attached to the upper heart, in order to increase its rate while saline solution dripped over it to the heart below, caused the second heart to speed up as well. Thus, he came to understand that it was a chemical being generated by the Vagus nerve

which mediates heart rate and this substance was later identified as acetylcholine. This repeating dream had led to a major breakthrough in cardiac physiology and, later, brain chemistry as well.

Although this experiment came to Loewi in a dream, it illustrates the point that creativity is fundamentally connected to altered state experiences. Many creative people describe deep waking reveries from which their inspiration and ideas are drawn. In these states there tends to be a revisioning of problems, whether they be about human relationships, spirituality, or cardiac physiology, which subsequently leads to new and innovative solutions.

Præternatural experiences and their precursors - dreams, trance and reverie states - are, therefore, an essential part of the growth and development of both individuals and cultures. These non-ordinary experiences can be understood as cognitive, affective and behavioural selective pressures acting in a similar manner to the physical pressures in our on-going evolution. As Sir Alister Hardy suggested, we should study the mechanisms and effects of these spontaneous experiences with the same interest and purpose with which we pursue disciplines such as molecular biology.

In a world where everything from politics to ecology is influenced by human activity and hence the human mind-set, we need to actively explore the forces the shape and change that mind-set. Such an exploration can be thought of as 'deep ecology'. Anyone who has thought even superficially about the ecological crisis realises that the revisioning of our role in the total environment requires a deep change in fundamental attitudes or

worldview. This type of change has come, historically, from the insights of artists, writers, scientists, religious leaders and politicians over the millennia and these insights have often arisen from the mystical, visionary and paranormal experiences of these historical individuals.

In the history of religion, alone, there are numerous examples of those who brought into the world a new vision of harmony as a result of an encounter with the præternatural. Gautama Buddha had a profound mystical experience and his subsequent teaching inspired a religion which, for the past two and a half millennia, has nurtured the ecological vision of live and let live (19). Similarly, George Fox, founder of the Quakers, started preaching following a paranormal vision of the slaughter of Christians in much earlier Roman times at Litchfield in England (10).

What all this seems to suggest is that we can no longer leave the discovery of the new vision we require for our survival on the planet to chance and the legacy of rare world-historic individuals such as the Buddha and George Fox. In these times, we require the use of the more modern methods of scientific inquiry and philosophical analysis which are available to us for the exploration of the præternatural. Particularly, from an in-depth exploration of spontaneous cases as they occur in the real world, it may be possible to develop a training 'map' so that we all may have an opportunity to find our way into this rich source of social, political and spiritual renewal and growth.

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