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What is Really Real



Mysticism is an immediate, direct, intuitive knowledge of God or ultimate reality attained through personal experience. The mystical life is characterized by enhanced vitality, productivity, serenity and joy as the inner and outer aspects harmonize in union.

On a Saturday in July of 1997, my husband Ken and I traveled to the village of Primavera in the mountains of central Mexico to attend a week-long Tantra yoga workshop to rekindle the passion and intimacy in our marriage. We sat on the floor of the retreat center that first night among a dozen or so nervous couples listening to Charles and Carolyn Muir, well-known Tantra teachers, explain that in this week-long workshop they were going to show us how our relationships could be revitalized and deepened through a daily Tantric yoga practice. I had no inkling that two days into the workshop I would be split wide open to mystical states of consciousness and that my fundamental view of reality would be turned inside out.

It started suddenly with an uncontrollable jerk as I sat on a straight backed chair in a small rustic cottage in Rio Caliente Resort. Then came a loud inner roar like the sound of water rushing, followed by the searing image in my mind's eye of hot white light shooting up my spine, through my brain and out the top of my head. The force was so strong that my head flew backward as my arms flung upward, fingers splayed and palms raised to the heavens. Accompanied by a strong, hot dry wind the light drew me up and out of my body to

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an expanded universe where everything was vividly alive, conscious and interconnected. There were no boundaries. Time was the eternal moment. I was in absolute stillness and at peace in a cosmic void. From some deep indwelling presence came the words, I AM. It was pure consciousness devoid of thought, meaning and interpretation. I inherently knew that this was the essence of who I was. And as it was true for me it was true for everyone and everything.

At some point I sensed separation and I became aware of the presence of others – other souls blending together in a primordial soup of consciousness. As I merged with them I accessed profound knowledge of everything there was to know, that was ever known and would ever be known. But as I dived in further I found there were no specific facts, only an unformed type of knowledge composed of infinite potential which I could shape shift at whim through thought. Then I became aware of an all powerful, all knowing presence which was the source of all things. Armed with a profound love it threw daggers of ecstasy at my heart across time and space, shouting “love is the fabric of the universe”.

Suddenly I felt intense pressure from all directions as the universe cracked and light spilled across the cosmos. In my mind’s eye light and energy separated from the infinite and with a loud crash I was slammed back into my tiny body. Stunned by the shear pain of being in physical form and longing for the oneness I had experienced, I opened my eyes to find myself still sitting in that straight backed chair with hands raised skyward. The room and everything in it sparkled with luminous white light. The air was thick and the slightest movement of my hand created bioluminescent eddies of dancing light.

I began to get my bearings. I was stunned realizing that I had been living my life as Stephen Covey says, ‘with my ladder on the wrong wall!’ At the time I was a research biologist and university professor living comfortably with the notion that reality is only physical. I believed that consciousness was generated by the brain and that I was simply the sum total of my thoughts, hopes and beliefs. There was nothing more. Yet now I knew we are each really a facet of one seamless whole and vitality- life, energy, vigor, exuberance –whatever you wish to call it, thrives to the extent to which each of us is aligned with the oneness of our nature. With this realization the touchstone from which I lived my life vanished and was replaced by the direct experience of my own mystical nature. I had glimpsed what the Hindu’s call the face of God and in that instant everything about me changed.

It has taken me years to realign my life to the knowledge that I am

much more than my body, that consciousness is not an awareness produced by my brain but is instead the very stuff that creates the universe. Before this happened, I knew myself to be separate and distinct, an objective reality among objective realities. I saw life as a series of dichotomies: me versus you; yours versus mine; and good versus evil. I had a materialistic, self-centered worldview where events unfolded “out there” by cause and effect relationships according the laws of probability. The way I saw it, life was a crap shoot. It was also a zero sum game where the bigger your piece of the pie, the smaller mine had to be. Then bam! In an instant as I sat in that small rustic cottage, I found myself stark naked in the light of Spirit’s passing glance.

Even now, ten years later, I can sit quietly in stillness and re-experience this awakening. Much of it comes back to me as a cacophony of images, sounds, sensations and the powerful emotions of rapture, wonder and awe. Often it comes as a *gestalt*, a complete complex bundle of profound insight that can’t be broken down in a linear fashion into smaller chunks. Contradictions flow smoothly into insight. On one hand, there are no boundaries. I am the observer and the observed. Yet on the other, the observer, the observed and the very process itself are simply facets of the undivided whole. Underlying this whole, animating it and orchestrating everything is the radiant life force powered by love, on an endless journey of self expression.

Kundalini

For the first few days I was plagued by doubt about the validity of what had happened. Was this a spiritual experience in which I glimpsed the true nature of reality, a reality made up of pure consciousness? Or did I have some kind of brain malfunction? My sanity seemed intact. I was assured by my husband that I was behaving rationally to an extraordinary event. A psychologist who was with me at the time was also reassuring as he explained that I had had a ‘Kundalini’. I couldn’t shake the sense of realness that I felt –it felt more real to me than any other moment in my life. I also began to notice fundamental changes in the way my mind was working, as if my brain had been rewired in some way. Astounding insights –connections that I had never made before - flashed into my awareness almost daily. A strong voice of intuition screamed out at me almost as often. I had an insatiable curiosity to read and understand everything associated with consciousness and the true nature of reality. Over time other changes became apparent. I was more empathetic, more caring and less materialistic. I had even lost my fear of death! Over time these changes stabilized into a different temperament and personality –a

kinder, gentler me that remains to this day.

I quickly learned that my experience wasn't unique: more than forty percent of people in the US claim to have had experiences that they define as mystical; and a National Institute of Health study found that thirty three percent of Americans have experienced "a divine and wonderful spiritual power". Ten percent of the general population has reported an out of body experience and 15 million Americans have had a near-death-experience (NDE).

It was the Hindus who first called the great force that cascaded up my spine that day *Kundalini*, the primal energy that created the cosmos. It is the life force itself. Symbolized as a serpent coiled three and a half times around the base of the spine, it is known to many, including Native American Hopi, medieval Gnostics, Buddhists and !Kung bushmen of the Kalahari Desert. Kundalini was the driving force underlying myths for Joseph Campbell and the libido of Sigmund Freud. Carl Jung saw it as "the other face of God," while for Walt Whitman it was enlightenment.

And it turns out that while mystical experiences have occurred for millennia they are becoming more frequent in the West. They might even be the tell tale signs of a massive shift in consciousness catapulting us into the next stage in the evolution of our species. Some point to the development of advanced medical technologies which can bring us back from the brink of death as another powerful catalyst for evolutionary change. There is data to support this: recent research found that fully eighteen percent of patients who were brain dead from cardiac arrest and then resuscitated reported that they had an NDE. Upon recovery most of these patients exhibited physiological and psychological changes similar to my own. The implication is that as medicine becomes even more effective at bringing people back from the brink of death it is creating a whole new class of mystics.

Understanding the Limitations of Science

I knew that I had experienced absolute reality –that knowledge was unshakable. I could simply accept my experience at face value, that I witnessed the true nature of reality. But the scientist in me needed corroboration. I wasn't convinced that my experience was any more real just because it was shared with others. I needed to know if there was an objective basis for my perceptions. The similarity between my experience and those reported by others might easily be explained by a common neurophysiology creating false perceptions in the same way that NDEs are explained away as the result of brain malfunction from oxygen deprivation, trauma or severe illness.

I set off to determine if it was possible to scientifically distinguish between these two options. As a biologist my initial instinct was to learn as much as I could about how the brain functions during mystical unity to see if it might provide clues to what happened to me. Two scientists, Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili, have conducted seminal work in this area using as their subjects highly proficient meditators. The experiments were simple but provocative. The idea was to relate the subjective perceived reality of the meditator with specific patterns of brain activity at the moment of meditative unity. For example, one of their subjects, Robert, an accomplished practitioner of Tibetan meditation described how as his conscious mind stills, a deeper part of 'himself' emerges that is "is inextricably connected to all of creation".

The scientists used state-of-the-art technology to obtain images of Robert's brain while he was in this meditative state. They found decreased activity in a small region nestled in the top rear section of the brain called the orientation association area (OAA) which functions to orient us in space and to estimate the distance objects are from us in our environment. In other words, it helps us distinguish the boundaries of "self" from "other". At the same time blood flow to another area of the brain called the holistic operator increased. The holistic operator which is located in the parietal area of the right hemisphere allows us to see the world as a whole –to look at a nose, two eyes and a mouth and instantly recognize it as the face of a loved one- to see the 'bigger picture' from the parts. These brain scans provide a biological basis for Robert's mystical perceptions: At the very moment that he was experiencing "a connection to all of creation" while lacking any sense of separation from the whole – the holistic operator in his brain was highly active and his OAA, which distinguishes self from non-self, was depressed.

But, I realized, no matter how much we learn about how the brain functions during mystical unity all these experiments can really tell us is the extent to which our 'internal reality' matches our perceptions of it. We can not distinguish if the brain generated the mystical state or if it actually existed in objective reality. The truth is we will never be able to determine the extent to which the external objective world correlates with our internal perceptions of it and this applies to all of our perceptions, not just spiritual ones.

One reason for this is that we don't experience consciousness, reality or anything else for that matter any direct way. What we think of as reality is really only a rendition of reality created from sensory input, and influenced by emotions and past experiences. All of our perceptions are only second hand interpretations by the

brain of what may or may not be real. Everything we experience -- thoughts, emotions, insights, intuition and perceptions -- arise from the processing of information that is received in the form of neural signals from sensory input, and translated in complex neural circuits and feedback loops by the brain to create a perception of an external objective reality. Put simply, we perceive an external reality because this is how the brain processes the information that it receives.

Further, the very question assumes that there is an objective external reality 'out there' for us to perceive. We assume this because our brain processes two senses of reality: first an ethereal conscious self and second, a solid, unchanging material reality perceived to be external from the self. This dual sense of reality feels so real that the earliest western philosophers did not even question it for a thousand years. It wasn't until the 17th-century philosopher René Descartes made his famous statement "I think therefore I am" that philosophers began to ask how we "know" external reality, shifting philosophical thought from duality to epistemology with its emphasis on how we "know".

I realized science could provide no solid insight as to what is really real. I began to understand the limitations of science and knew I had to rely on my own sensibilities to develop a conceptual framework to replace the old one I left behind.

But what did I really know?

With my new mystical insight I knew that everything is interconnected to one seamless whole - nothing is separate. I knew that this whole is made of pure untethered consciousness the underlying foundation of all of creation - the God-stuff. In the unity state the ego stepped away and the veil of judgment lifted to reveal to me for the first time bare ass naked consciousness. It was vivid. It was authentic. It was unforgettable. It changed my life.

I knew that the "I" of my awareness when I was in this unity state, was not the "I" that I identified with in my every day waking world. This was not a subjective I. It exists beyond the brain, beyond matter. It is the "I" of the one seamless whole. I knew that there really is a God and this was it.

Usually, when we think of consciousness we think of the consciousness of 'something' with the tacit assumption that it springs forth from matter. Yet, I experienced a consciousness that is the source of all matter -not the other way around. If consciousness is generated by the brain, I reasoned that there could be no compelling evidence to the contrary. Yet studies involving NDEs provide such evidence,

particularly those described by psychologist Ken Ring involving the blind. During their NDEs they reported leaving their bodies, floating to the ceiling and watching the medical team trying to revive them. Dr. Ring found that each was able to see and accurately describe in detail the events that were unfolding. Subsequently they could provide details that were confirmed by those who were in the room at the time. In a few cases the person had been blind since birth, and during the NDE, experienced sight for the first time! If consciousness is generated by the brain, how can we explain that a blind person could experience sight at precisely the moment his brain stopped functioning? This seemed like irrefutable evidence that consciousness can not be a property that emerges from the brain.

I also knew that this mystical awareness felt more real to me than anything I've ever experienced. In addition to feeling more real at the time, it continues to feel more real as I recall it ten years later. Later I learned that one of the oldest problems of philosophy addresses exactly this issue of how we know what is truly real; since the time of the Greek Stoics the central criterion for determining realness has been the "subjective vivid sense of reality", called *phantia catalyptica*. It is a compass pointing in the direction of wholeness, and vividness is the needle pointing us to the magnetic north of oneness and divine love.

I also finally understood that the question was not, 'what is really real' in some black and white sense of realness –this is real and that isn't. It's all real because we hold human form and through it embody spirit in each and every experience, but that realness is a matter of degree. Everything has a shade of realness in relation to that ultimate reality-unity.

Consciousness is a Continuum from Separation to Unity

Each state of consciousness falls somewhere along a continuum from separation to unity and the closer we are to unity the more vivid the experience. For most altered states of consciousness, such as a dream, psychotic episode or an LSD trip, the experience is unhinged, and only the flimsiest connection to oneness. Yet real it is, and is felt as such when in that state. Then it is immediately recognized as not real upon return to day-to-day consciousness. Such experiences are less vivid, and therefore, less real.

Our day-to-day waking world is more lucid, and is what we normally think of as real. It encompasses a broad group of experiences along the continuum; at one end are such states as paranoia brewing in fear. Then a bit closer to oneness is depression with its overwhelming sense

of separateness and alienation. Closer still is loneliness. We move closer to unity as we connect with family, friends and community, and even closer when we fall into romantic love or experience mother-baby bonding.

The union felt during sexual climax is on the borderline, bridging our everyday waking consciousness and those hyper-lucid states which we vividly sense as being more real than day to day consciousness, both during the experience and afterward. Cognitive psychologists call these *primary knowing states*, and suggest that they are the foundation from which all other states of consciousness are derived. They lead us to our true north –to unity. They are how we experience increasing connection. The sense of being at one with nature is a start. There is an even greater connection during certain trance states, peak experiences, visions, lucid dreams and NDEs. And closer still to oneness we enter the profound states reported in mystical accounts through out the ages, cosmic consciousness, with its awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. Farthest to the right on this continuum is unity, the magnetic north of our internal compass where there is no sense of time or space, or separation of subject and object.

As physical beings we tap dance back and forth along this continuum of consciousness between separation and unity, propelled by the choices we make moment to moment. The trick is to know where on the continuum we find ourselves, and if we are moving toward or away from oneness. How can we tell? Emotions are the key. They are the barometer for sensing the changes in our inner landscape. They are fragile and volatile. They can be hijacked by thoughts of judgment, regrets from the past and worries about the future. All such thoughts take us out of present moment awareness, the only place where oneness can be found.

Paying attention to what we feel allows us to understand where we are on the continuum. I can monitor what I am thinking, and change my thoughts to ones that increase connection and bring me closer to oneness. Thoughts of rejection bring a sense of separation accompanied by anxiety and despair. As I reach for a better feeling thought my emotions become elevated and I am more optimistic and connected. With even further connection I feel gratitude and am thankful for all I have in life. The closer we are to oneness, the more we feel that ultimate emotion of vitality, divine love.

All of our emotions are really hues of divine love as it is the invisible fabric that weaves us together with the natural world. Vulnerable in their helplessness, pets, infants and those at death's door might best pull us toward oneness. A puppy wagging its tail when its master returns; a young child being comforted in her mother's arms after

a nasty fall; the last gaze of a dying parent- stark naked, God's love pours through their eyes and grabs our hearts. It takes our breath away. It is pure, unabashed, unconditional love!

Yet to embody this love we must stay anchored in the knowledge that we are each an expression of the one divine presence, each a facet of the perfect whole. In this realization lies the true power of the Golden Rule. Studies have shown that the greater the feeling of connectedness the less stressed, healthier and happier we are. We feel more alive. It is this interconnection that increases health and well being in the elderly when they have a pet, and explains why married couples live longer than singles.

We feel this sense of connection in its more subtle forms as sweet oneness courts our senses everyday. It is the beauty in a deep red rose, its dew drops glistening in the morning light as we walk through the garden; the rapture from a familiar Brahms lullaby as we sit under the stars at a summer concert; the coziness of the fireplace on a winter's day; and the delightful aroma and taste of the morning's first cup of coffee.

My Practice

So I remember to bring into each moment the eye-opening realization that the divine is fully present in every person and situation. With practice I have found this to be easy when I am awed by a beautiful rainbow or when I look into the eyes of a new born child. I've found it to be much harder when I hear about the deaths of five young Amish girls gunned down in a country school house in Pennsylvania, reflect on 9/11 or try to comprehend genocide in Rwanda. For while far from apparent at first blush, I know that these too must hold the divine. It is in these situations that I hold my faith tightly and use it to remind myself of our oneness.

From this place comes my sobering spiritual practice which is to live in present moment awareness and reframe my life as a perpetual search for the divine; to look beyond judgment and straight through the faces of shock, horror and disgust and ask, 'where is God in this?' Each time, I find that God shows up smack in the thick of it, often under the guise of forgiveness but just under the surface is the essence of our life force -- a steady stream of divine love which pulls us up out of the murk of fear, anger and blame to glimpse the oneness.

In the Amish killings God's fingerprints were all over the place. Emergency workers told reporters, "God was with us while we were taking care of these kids". Spontaneous prayer meetings sprouted all over Lancaster County. In their own grief the Amish quickly

recognized the suffering of the killer's family and reached out to them bringing food to the home and attending the killer's funeral.

It's easy to assume that God was in Amish country because of their steadfast faith but God doesn't play favorites. Divine love forges the most unlikely reconciliations when families are torn apart by horrific violence. They are propelled by the longing for oneness that comes to the forefront when violence tears a swatch out of the cloth of wholeness leaving a gaping hole of pain and separation. This is how Amy Biehl's parents could employ two of her accused killers in the foundation they founded in their murdered daughter's name in Cape Town. It is how Immaculee Ilibagiza forgave the Hutu 'friends' and neighbors who hacked her family and friends to pieces as she holed up in a tiny bathroom with seven other women for three months. Hard as we might try to hold on to blame, anger and resentment, that gaping hole can only be filled by understanding, forgiveness and compassion- the healing emotions that bring us closer to unity.

Through this practice I know God as wholeness, and realize that "to pray without ceasing" is to live in each moment recognizing our divine nature. I remind myself that emotions -beauty, rapture, delight, forgiveness, compassion-- even sadness, anger and despair- are all cues from God. They are breadcrumbs leading us to gratitude, wonder and awe - the feelings evoked when we recognize God in ourselves and one another. And as these emotions lead us to oneness, God responds. We are laid wide open to grace - that essential aspect of God which nourishes life and fuels expansion.

