

A Neurosurgeon's Journey Into the Afterlife

Eben Alexander III—2008

As a neurosurgeon with over 20 years experience in academic neurosurgery, I thought I had a pretty good idea of how the brain and mind worked. On November 10, 2008 I awoke with severe back pain, followed by the worst headache of my life, and a rapid descent into a week-long coma. I recall nothing of what happened over the next 7 days. On the third day I was extremely ill, with diminishing chances for survival and virtually no chance of recovery.

After awakening back to this world I was completely amnesic of my life before coma. I remembered no words, no personal memories, no religious or scientific concepts, or even family members. All I remembered was where I had just been, in an extraordinary odyssey that seemed to last for months or years. I lay unconscious. My memories gradually returned over the next 8 weeks.

Thanks to its preferential destruction of the neocortex, severe meningoencephalitis is, essentially, a perfect model for human death. That fact would nominate the disease for widespread study in brain and consciousness research, save for one problem: it almost always results in death. Almost no one returns to tell the tale. I knew that details of my experience might help refine our understanding of the brain, especially the neocortex, and its relationship to the mechanism and phenomenon of consciousness.

My mind emerged from coma in a coarse, murky, unresponsive realm. The next phase was a slowly spinning white light of great clarity, associated with a perfect musical melody. It seemed so much more real than this earthly realm. Communication there goes light years beyond our simplistic linear thinking, beyond the bottleneck of linguistically constrained awareness we experience in these physical bodies in the earthly realm. There was a lovely young woman accompanying me, one who never spoke a word, but whose thoughts of unconditional love and assurance came straight into my awareness. She promised me I would be taken care of, that I had nothing to fear, and that I was completely loved by the awe-inspiring Creator of all that is. I was informed that I was not there to stay. They would teach me many things, but I would be going “back.” Since I had lost all of my memories of life on Earth, I had no idea what that meant.

As a neurosurgeon, I was taught that the brain creates consciousness. ... the more we come to understand the physical workings of the brain, the more we realize it does not create consciousness at all. We are conscious in spite of our brain. The brain serves more as a reducing valve or filter, limiting pre-existing consciousness down to the trickle of the illusory ‘here-now’ in which we find ourselves in this physical realm.

