

Jung, death and the collective unconscious

Dr Eben Alexander's book, *Proof of Heaven*, had me intrigued. In his book he describes an experience of super consciousness. He calls this place, "heaven". While he was having this experience, all the medical evidence pointed to complete brain death. He had succumbed to a rare e-coli meningitis. This is an infection that is nearly always fatal.

I had often come across the term "near death experience", but put it down to some "last fling of the brain". At a more psychological level, I considered this to be based on wishful thinking, or perhaps some hallucination that was linked to oxygen deprivation.

Dr Eben Alexander's book was, however, very convincing. In many ways it was not typical of the classic near death experience that lasts only a few minutes. Here was somebody, to all intents and purposes, completely brain dead for almost a week.

He had a complete recovery - against all expectations. The story he told, however, challenged the medical establishment. He described a world of such love and beauty, that it sent the sceptics reeling.

Dr Alexander's book triggers a fundamental question, "does consciousness really reside in the brain?"

Ironically, Dr Eben Alexander is a neurosurgeon, someone who is intimately connected to the workings of the brain.

Once I had finished reading his book, I started my own reading on near death experiences. What I found left me quite amazed. This was no rare phenomenon, experienced by a few. It seemed that there are millions of people who have had similar experiences of what is now termed NDEs, or "near death experiences".

Near death experiences are experienced by those who have been resuscitated after a period of unconsciousness due to the heart stopping for whatever reason. With the increased sophistication of medical techniques and medication, this is no longer a unique phenomenon. Many celebrities have spoken of their near death experiences, perhaps some of the most famous being Elizabeth Taylor and Sharon Stone. Certainly, this is proving to be a story that will just not go away.

The person whose experience stood out in a very real way to me was that of Carl Jung. His approach to psychology has always either created firm adherents, or those who see him as a quack - someone in need of psychological help himself.

I have always been drawn to Carl Jung. He has taken psychology beyond the mechanistic and deterministic models and placed them into a more spiritual context. He sees the individual as more than a conglomerate of cells, impulses, instincts and libido.

He described it in symbolic terms, surreal, not unlike the prophetic vision of a mystic.

Carl Jung had what seems to be a near death experience in 1944. He admits later that this experience shaped the most important elements of his psychological theory. He died in 1961, approximately seventeen years after his experience.

There are a number of elements that stand out and share similarities with other people who have had near death experiences. I am going to examine some of these similarities, as it serves as a fascinating insight into his theory and the growing awareness of the so-called “near death phenomenon”.

The image of the earth as Gaia

Carl Jung describes leaving his body and travelling about a thousand miles into space. His description of the earth is remarkably similar to later astronauts who are able to see the planet as a living, blue like pearl.

It seemed to me that I was high up in space. Far below I saw the globe of the Earth, bathed in a gloriously blue light. I saw the deep blue sea and the continents. Far below my feet lay Ceylon, and in the distance ahead of me the subcontinent of India. My field of vision did not include the whole Earth, but its global shape was plainly distinguishable and its outlines shone with a silvery gleam through that wonderful blue light. In many places the globe seemed colored, or spotted dark green like oxidized silver

He describes visiting an antechamber, similar to a temple he visited in Ceylon. It is here that he has a deep sense of connection, belonging, where he senses a profound oneness.

His encounter with a Hindu sitting in lotus position alerts him to being expected.

At this point, Jung experiences something similar to what many people describe as a life review.

I had the feeling that everything was being sloughed away; everything I aimed at or wished for or thought, the whole phantasmagoria of earthly existence, fell away or was stripped from me - an extremely painful process. Nevertheless something remained; it was as if I now carried along with me everything I had ever experienced or done, everything that had happened around me. I might also say: it was with me, and I was it. I consisted of all that, so to speak. I consisted of my own history and I felt with great certainty: this is what I am. I am this bundle of what has been and what has been accomplished

Unlike the mechanistic and materialistic concept of the human being that forms a discontinuous, contained body of flesh and blood, this is a sense of being one with the universe. There is no time and space as we experience it on earth; rather there is a pattern of connectedness that connects us through all eternity.

Carl Jung uses his theory of collective consciousness to explain the experience of timelessness. The symbol of archetypes allows him to develop a concept in a symbolic manner. His archetypes encompass all time and humanity, all history involving the use of myths and universal archetypes.

A precognition of someone's death

Many people who have gone through a near death experience are told of the impending death of somebody close to them, or they develop paranormal abilities that alert them to coming disasters, or death. Jung also experiences this in his near death state.

Jung's described his doctor coming to call him back. He saw the doctor as he explained in what he called, "primal form". This made him sense that the doctor was already outside of his temporal existence on earth and would soon die. He was convinced that for some reason the doctor was going to replace him in a journey towards an earthly death.

While I was thinking over these matters, something happened that caught my attention. From below, from the direction of Europe, an image floated up. It was my doctor, or rather, his likeness - framed by a golden chain or a golden laurel wreath. I knew at once:

I too was in my primal form, though this was something I did not observe but simply took for granted. As he stood before me, a mute exchange of thought took place between us. The doctor had been delegated by the Earth to deliver a message to me, to tell me that there was a protest against my going away. I had no right to leave the Earth

Once back in his conscious state, Jung tried to warn the doctor of an impending disaster. The doctor had no idea what he might be referring to and, if anything, showed a bit of irritation.

A while later, Doctor H, took to bed and passed away from septicaemia.

The aftermath of depression and isolation

Carl Jung found that no one could understand and relate to his experience. Possibly he was seen as delusional or suffering from post infectious psychosis. This is similar to what many people experience following NDE.

Eben Alexander says that many people seemed embarrassed by his claims. His medical colleagues in particular were dismissive, or remained silent. Doctor H in Jung's case was also extremely perturbed by what he perceived to be delusional rantings.

Jung went through a few weeks of intense depression. He rebelled against the thought of remaining in what he called a “box like existence”. After his feeling of weightlessness and timelessness, earthly existence seemed empty and dull.

It seemed to me as if behind the horizon of the cosmos a three-dimensional world had been artificially built up, in which each person sat by himself in a little box. And now I should have to convince myself all over again that this was important! Life and the whole world struck me as a prison, and it bothered me beyond measure that I should again be finding all that quite in order. I had been so glad to shed it all, and now it had come about that I - along with everyone else - would again be hung up in a box by a thread.

He seemed to be most upset against the earthly experience of separation. Compared to his feeling of oneness and connection, this was empty. The conception of a shared consciousness is strongly bound to this ultimate unity and a shared human destiny.

Unlike Freud who saw the psyche as consisting of id, ego and superego, Jung developed his theory of a spiritual connectedness.

Freud saw the individual as driven by libinuous sexual instincts. Jung, saw the individual as ego, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. This collective unconscious existed outside of history and the individual, and united everyone through archetypes.

Prophetic visions for a period following the experience

Jung experienced a series of visions following his NDE. Again, this is a well documented experience of many who go through a near death experience.

Some people develop some form of extra sensory perception. This includes an ability to have visions of things to come. In some case it is an ability to discern energy that is invisible to our normal five senses.

Jung went through a period where he had visions related to a symbolic eternity. As is the case in many prophetic vision, he saw things in symbols, rather than a movie screen prediction of coming events.

Jung’s visions are filled with religious imagery. His first vision is connected to one of his nurses where he sees her connected to an archetypal scene.

When I looked at her, she seemed to have a blue halo around her head. I myself was, so it seemed, in the Pardes Rimmonim, the garden of pomegranates, and the wedding of Tiferet with Malchut was taking place. Or else I was Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai, whose wedding in the afterlife was being celebrated. It was the mystic marriage as it appears in the Cabbalistic tradition. I cannot tell you how wonderful it was.

Jung's visions bring him into a state of bliss where he can re-experience, in a limited sense, his near death happiness. As in the case of many of those who have had near death experiences, life on earth becomes a heavy burden.

Now gray morning is coming again; now comes the gray world with its boxes! What idiocy, what hideous nonsense! Those inner states were so fantastically beautiful that by comparison this world appeared downright ridiculous.

Change in perception and priorities

After the experience, Jung found himself completely stripped of his previous identity. What he held as central and important now seemed trivial.

This is a very common feature of people who have had a NDE. Possibly the most important common feature is the shift in values. The material becomes insignificant and relationships become far more important. Living a life of integrity seems to be of greater significance than success, or wealth.

Jung had always been drawn to the spiritual and this becomes more significant after his NDE.

It was only after the illness that I understood how important it is to affirm one's own destiny. In this way we forge an ego that does not break down when incomprehensible things happen; an ego that endures, that endures the truth, and that is capable of coping with the world and with fate. Then, to experience defeat is also to experience victory. Nothing is disturbed neither inwardly nor outwardly, for one's own continuity has withstood the current of life and of time.

It would not surprise me if in another era, under different circumstances, Jung would have become a religious mystic. Jung shied away from the constraints of formal religion, although he remained fascinated by its spiritual and symbolic undertones.

Towards the end of his life, he did start a deep dialogue with a Catholic theologian and felt that he had some understanding of what Jung was attempting to achieve. It could well be that the mysticism of Catholicism was far more open to his ideas.

An interesting aspect of NDE experiencers is that many of those who were religious before, become more concerned with a broader spirituality, defined as some as universalism. The need to be right is toned down, and openness and tolerance towards all religious beliefs and practices becomes of prime importance.

Dr Eben Alexander describes his experience in one word, "love".

Jung explains his openness and tolerance that resulted from his near death experience.

We may think there is a sure road. But that would be the road of death. Then nothing happens any longer at any rate, not the right things. Anyone who takes the sure road is as good as dead.

This is a step away from the internal battles raging within the psychoanalytical societies of the period. Jung seemed to move away from a deterministic understanding of life. Life is no longer a mechanistic cause and effect of instinct, but rather a pilgrimage where each person is called to live out his or her destiny.

Carl Jung has been seen by many as a prophetic voice, a man before his times. Many see him as puzzling, a person who borders on the psychotic.

The writings of the mystic have more in common with Carl Jung's theory of collective unconsciousness than the writings of a more biological, deterministic concept of the psyche.

The description of his near death experience and the upsurge in near death literature places his writings in a much more understandable context.