

A Near-Death Stimulated Loss Of Self And Consciousness Therein

臨死体験を誘因とする自己の喪失と内なる意識

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要 旨

頸部挫傷による脊椎の損傷で頸部以下が麻痺した状態で、夕暮れ時に人里離れた場所で凍死寸前に陥った時、筆者の精神状態は正常の状態とはかけ離れたものだった。意識は鮮明で、2時間以内に死亡するだろうと確信していた。その状況下で、「自己」もしくは(少なくとも筆者の場合には)常に意識を支配する「私という単一の状態」は一挙に崩れ、「私」は集合体となった。筆者の経験はまさに臨死体験であったが、典型的な臨死体験の範疇に収まるものではなかった。この不幸な体験は、ガッツァニガの左能解釈プログラム、およびミンスキーの思考組織理論を実証するものであった。すなわち左能解釈プログラムは、我々の躁的とも言える達成指向状態を司るものであり、それが機能しない時には究極の精神の安寧がもたらされる事が実証されたのである。

ABSTRACT

My mental state as I was alone, freezing to death in a remote area at sunset while paralyzed below the neck due a damaged spinal cord following a broken neck was far different than normal. I was fully conscious and was absolutely certain that I would be dead within about two hours. In this setting, the *self* or singular *I* that always dominates the (mine at least) conscious state was summarily gagged, and what was once *I* became a community. My experience was as near to death as could be, but mine does not fit the typical near-death experience criteria. My unfortunate experience supports Gazzaniga's left brain interpreter and Minsky's Society of Mind theory of how our thinking is organized. The left brain interpreter might be responsible for our ever goal oriented, even somewhat manic, condition (i.e., the human condition), as its absence brings sublime peace of mind.

Preface

On October 22, at about 4 PM in an undeveloped wooded area of Sapporo I had a mountain biking accident. While attempting a jump I flipped and landed on the top of my head. I was apparently knocked unconscious and do not know for how long this lasted. When I regained consciousness I realized that I was paralyzed from the neck down (it turned out that the third cervical vertebrae was broken). I was unable to move. I was alone in an area that few people ever entered, and it would soon be dark. The temperature was low and would drop to near freezing that night.

so I assumed that I would die within a few hours. Fortunately, however, shortly after sunset a man was walking his dog using a flashlight, and he heard my calls. He then notified the authorities, and I was transported by ambulance and helicopter to a hospital where I spent three months recovering. With treatment and rehabilitation I returned to work with difficulty three months later, and today (March 2002) more than a year later I have regained a fair proportion of my previous functions.

An Unintended Loss Of Self

I woke up hearing a voice screaming, but it took some time to realize that it was my own. My face was smashed into some sandy dirt, and breathing was very painful and labored. Thus, I feared that I would soon suffocate. Shortly thereafter I knew where I was, and I realized that I had crashed my mountain bike. However, when I tried to stand up and check out my body and bike, nothing happened. I could move my head though, and frantically with my mouth I dug into the sandy soil to make space to breath more easily. Repeatedly I tried to move my arms and legs, but still nothing. Senses below my head were almost gone, save, indeed in a sick twist of humor, that I knew my left side hurt very much, and I sensed that my left hip, knee, and foot were grotesquely twisted. I also sensed that my left foot was still attached to the pedal, and my left knee was pressing against the bike. My breathing was very unsure and proceeded in gasps that required intense effort and were at the brink of suffocation. In vain I tried to move into a less painful position than face smashed down with my bike beneath me.

Initially my thoughts were very hysterical. I knew that I had broken my neck. The idea of certain death was frantically presented to the exclusion of any other thoughts; my mind was a cacophony of these horrible death-centered vignettes that seemed to be a glimpse of what complete insanity is. Mind you, the situation was bleak indeed: there was no chance of rescue (I had biked in this area hundreds of times and only seen two other people), though the body was continuously screaming for help yet in a voice that was as pathetic as the situation; and, I would fall asleep then die by hypothermia within about two hours (I was dressed in shorts and a short sleeved shirt and the temperature would get near freezing at night).

Possibly for self preservation to avoid scaring myself to death, I then lost connection with this panicked me, and my consciousness altered. The screaming never ceased, though it did become more removed from me. Also, the constant struggle to breathe and roll over seemed to become less than my own as my conscious self retreated from the body's dire state. Where once was a concept of *I*, there was now a vast group sense which you could liken to a Greek forum, save all the members or modules were parts of me. Indeed, it seemed where once was a raging mad mind focused on its own helplessness and pathos, there was now a very well ordered, logical and calm state. The previous insane *I* that was having fits was silenced.

There was a relaxed group discussion about how to proceed. The consensus reached was that there was no way to avoid death, thus it would be highly illogical to worry and waste our final mo-

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ments concentrating on the pain and immanent death. After this conclusion was reached, the intense pain could still be accessed, but it was shunted to another level even further removed from my conscious workings. Instead, we (the concept of *I* was now gone) should enjoy our final minutes. The body continued its pleas for help, but the body was now very separate from the mind. So much so, that the body was of little concern: its fate did seem to be sealed. From this point on, a deep state of introspection and, oddly enough, inner peace was reached.

With this state of inner peace the mind had a vast feel that I had never experienced. It seemed as if thoughts that were usually not in the conscious realm were now exposed. The constraining or bottleneck of *I* was gone and the privy subconscious thoughts were made manifest. Thoughts were simultaneously presented on a massive scale. This ethereal state was exceptionally awe inspiring, even more so as I was only too aware that this was not a prelude to more life, but rather my own swan song. It is hard to fathom that I (in a group state of *we*) was infinitely happy while dying. I took solace in many things: the very good life I had lived with few regrets, the fact that I was going to die attached to my bike, dying of hypothermia would be a kind death, the beauty of the final stars I was seeing, and other thoughts too numerous to recollect. Of course there was concern for loved ones who would have to deal with my death, but that was unavoidable, so it was accepted; there was no internal struggle bemoaning my fate or any self-pity. I wished that I could convey to my loved ones and to whomever found my lifeless body that this was not at all anything to be sad about: life is good, but death is a guaranteed part therein. After the panicked self was silenced, completely missing, even though the situation was hopeless, was fear.

To Be Or Not To Be : Some Ideas About The Mind

Hamlet (Shakespeare 1600) opens his famous *to be or not to be* speech questioning his existence (Act 3, Scene 1):

To be, or not to be : that is the question :
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die : to sleep ;
No more ; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep ;
To sleep : perchance to dream : ay, there's the rub ;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause : there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life ;

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? *who would fardels bear,*
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.—Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd.

He is saying, possibly, that the conscious mind makes us cowards because we fear death, so much so that we will suffer whatever indignities are heaped upon us, rather than take mortal risks. Many critics believe that Hamlet knew that he rightfully had to avenge his father's treacherous death, but he was delayed by his *minds desire to preserve his life*. Goddard believes that the eye for an eye revenge was not what Shakespeare thought to be right at all, but the opposite: acts of blood cannot be corrected by acts of blood (Goddard 1951). Whatever the conflict of human nature, or the Bard's take on the issue, the fact is that Hamlet did choose revenge. To get to the point where he could act (the play on words is most relevant here) on this, he had to resolve his many dilemmas; one was to conquer his own fear. He became totally introspective, possibly crazy, if not feigned, to try to reason his way around his own strong sense of self-preservation at any cost. His internal struggle was much more complex, but fear of death was part of his manic thought process.

Research interest in consciousness used to be career suicide, but with the likes of Nobel laureates Gerald Edelman and Francis Crick getting involved, consciousness is now an exploding field (Wakefield 2001). Prior to my own unfortunate experiment with consciousness in a near-death setting, I had read, and watched on video, about Michael Gazzaniga's theory of the self through his work with split brain patients (Gazzaniga 1998, and Walter, Chip 1988). I had also read Marvin Min-

sky's *The Society of Mind* (Minsky 1985) about his thoughts on how the mind could be organized.

Gazzaniga studied split-brain patients (i.e., people in which the nerve bundle that connects the left and right hemispheres of the brain, the corpus callosum, is cut), and his studies support the theory that our minds are collections of specialized modules. These modules are organized by what he called the left brain interpreter (LBI) to achieve an integrated unified sense of self. This interpreter has a strong need to explain why events occur. It will do this in any way possible even if it must fabricate stories or memories to present a viable explanation for something. The right hemisphere is much more truthful, less able to solve problems, and not driven to rationalize. It appears that humans have lateralized abilities into specific regions or networks in the brain in order to utilize our brain's computing power efficiently. Lateralization seems to be rare in other animals (i.e., tasks that other animals can perform in either hemisphere, can only be done in one hemisphere by humans). The left brain dominates the much more truthful right brain with the LBI.

Minsky's book *The Society of Mind*, is as the title states. The mind could be organized as a society of agents that though each agent is responsible for a simple process, together as a connected whole, consciousness would result. Or stated differently, many mindless little parts can be connected to yield a mind.

Near-Death Experience?

Near-death experiences have a long history, but the impetus for current research in the area began following the publication of Raymond Moody's *Life After Life* (Kastenbaum 1989, and Moody 1975). From 150 people who had had an altered conscious experience due to almost biologically dying, a near-death experience (NDE), he identified what corresponds to a typical NDE; his criteria are still used today. A short list about what constitutes a typical NDE includes the following (chronologically listed): dissociation from the body, visualization of the body as if floating above it (out of body experience), feeling very detached from the body so that you are extremely comfortable and in no pain, acute vision, hyperlucid mental function, a high speed journey into a dark tunnel that has a radiant golden-white light at the end that draws you towards it like a magnet, a sense of overwhelming peace or well-being and absolute love, universal knowledge enters you from a limitless source, your entire life unfolds in front of you in many vivid visual images and you review your life without judgment but with deep compassion and understanding, a voice instructs you that you must choose to continue or return to physical life; most people return for the sake of others, and finally, abruptly return back to your own body with whatever pain that entails (Kastenbaum 1989). Of course this is the average NDE, and there are variations.

Rick Strassman feels that he might have discovered how NDEs occur (Strassman 2001). He studied the effects of DMT, a powerful but short acting psychedelic, in 60 subjects. Many of them had NDEs, or encountered aliens who were guides into a spirit world. He thinks that when we are dying, our pineal gland releases DMT which facilitates our spirit to leave the body. He never mentioned that any of the subjects lost their sense of *I*, so it seems that this lose of *I* that I experi-

enced is not related to any eleventh hour chemical drips in the brain. However, my enhanced vision and ethereal sensations could be due to a natural chemical. Studying NDEs in human patients looking for minuscule amounts of a quickly metabolized chemical buried deeply in the brain is unethical to the extreme. His ideas will remain unproved until spectrophotometers or other imaging devices many magnitudes more sensitive than what we possess now are invented that can safely monitor living brains.

Conclusion

My experience fits the early stages of a NDE fairly well, except that I never had any out of body sensations: mine was more a separation of mind and body. Mine is an unique case as I had knowledge of my impending death, but was biologically a few hours removed from the death threshold, and due to the spinal cord damage, was effectively separated from my body below the neck. However, perhaps I was in the initial stages of a NDE, but I needed more time to meet the other events like the high speed journey into the tunnel and my life unfolding in my mind. If I had not been found, perhaps I would have gone into the tunnel, never to come back and report any NDE, but enough hand waving. I did experience an extremely altered mental state, and feel that I did have a kind of NDE.

Somehow I was rescued, or course, or I couldn't be writing this now. I saw a light moving about 70 meters from me in an spot I knew to be an entryway into the area I was biking. My voice groaned out pleas of help, and the person, who was walking his dog, came to me: my introspective journey into my own conscious realm ended. From my free ranging mind came the familiar sense of *I*. I had to communicate with the man standing above me (I never did see his huge dog). I had to function in the world outside of the mind again. I was now in a position for self preservation. Perhaps the *I* or the LBI was needed so that I could be organized enough to make it in the real world. I can't imagine having a conversation in the free or non-*I* state. Whatever the reason, when I talked with my eleventh hour savior, it was *I* who talked with him.

My consciousness had altered, and I did experience the first stages of a NDE. But a question straight from my reinstated LBI is, "Why?"

My outrageous fortune had put me into the non-*I* introspective state of being perchance to dream before my sleep and death. Unlike Hamlet, I had no hope of living out the night. With certain death came the futility of fearing death. And, my fear was so great that it had to be suppressed, as insanity of the magnitude that I realized couldn't be healthy. The LBI was silenced and a society of mind or non-*I* state ensued. This conscious state I experienced was akin to what Gazzaniga and Minsky espouse.

A possible explanation is that the LBI was flooded with horrid images of fear and imminent death and it crashed like an overtaxed computer. This was a situation that it couldn't lie its way out of. Star Trek aficionados have many memories of a computer being given an unsolvable problem that sends it into confusion and subsequent shut down. To continue with ship metaphors, it's

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even possible that a mutiny in the mind happened when the LBI's actions became too unstable.

The inner peace I experienced after the loss of self or LBI was free of nagging questions, doubt, fear, etc.; all was accepted. It fits what you might predict of a mind free of the political machinations of the LBI. The resulting inner peace or state of bliss was more sublime than anything I'd ever encountered, yet I was dying an agonizing death being paralyzed, in pain, and near suffocation. It seems that our state of being is highly dependent on what you choose to focus on. Ignoring pain and retreating into the mind can easily be seen as a state to almost always avoid, but at times it could be useful. Perhaps meditation taps into the realm that I unwittingly found myself, or possibly even during sleep in our dreams.

The creating of "Just-So" stories, and keeping our minds focused and organized, is the realm of the LBI. This story telling is at the heart of the human experience--curiosity. Our human condition with its internal strife drives us, whether to madness and murder, or to exquisite creation. You could even look for Darwinian mechanisms in our minds. Such hunting for meaning, for understanding, is our curse and our blessing. But, surely, this hand waving has gone far enough as other symphonies can be conducted.

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