

# DreamSpeak

## An Interview With Clare Johnson, PhD

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By Robert Waggoner

*A lucid dreamer and doctoral student at the University of Leeds, England, Clare Johnson seeks to understand the role of lucid dreaming in the creative process. Drawing on her own lucid dreams and those of lucid dreamers in the creative arts, Clare continues to work on her Ph.D. thesis and on uncovering the mysteries of lucid dreaming. Last year, Clare wowed the judges of the Precognitive Dream Contest at the Copenhagen International Association for the Study of Dreams conference with her dream entry, which won first place.*

**Clare, you are working on a Ph.D. thesis on lucid dreaming and the creative process at the University of Leeds, England. Tell us, how did you first become interested in lucid dreaming?**

I have always been interested in dreams and different states of consciousness. When I was doing my undergraduate degree, a friend was reading Castaneda, and told me about consciousness in dreams, and the technique of finding your hands in the dream. I was fascinated, read the book for myself, and decided to try it.

**What was your first lucid dream experience? When was that?**

Here it is, recorded on Christmas Day, 1993:

*Last night I dreamt I saw my hands. They were very slender and white, and I thought, I can see my hands and this is a dream. I experienced a huge rush of excitement. I'm going to fly now, I decided. One of my brothers was behind me and somehow heard this thought. He said, "Go on then, Clare." I had a tiny moment of doubt, but reminded myself that since this was a dream I could do as I liked. I recalled that (according to Castaneda) I should receive a 'composite picture' within my dream if I focused my attention in a certain way, and as I looked around me, I noticed the incredible clarity of the scene - my brother looking at me, and an arched stone bridge in front of me. We were outside, the sky blue, the air fresh. It was just like really being there.*

*I turned my thoughts to flying again and my whole body began to tingle from head to toe. I floated up off the ground. I attempted to fly Superman-style by sticking my arms straight out in front of me, but nothing seemed to happen and I just continued to float, upright, higher into the air and towards the bridge. I'm going to bump into the wall, I realised as I glided towards the inside of the bridge. I relaxed, thinking it wouldn't hurt and that I'd just bounce from wall to wall for a while, but instead I went right through the wall. This was weird, passing through a sheet of thick yet yielding matter. It made me think of quicksand.*

*The tingly feeling in my body continued, and I started to see intricate fractal patterns unfolding in bright colours, with lots of electric blue. As the fractals moved, it struck me that they had the quality of a running stream, as they were in constant motion, and yet if I 'froze' them they always looked the same, no matter where they were in their cycle of movement. I went deeper into the electric blue, swam right into it, and gradually rose to wakefulness.*

**Was there something about that experience that excited you?**

I was very excited by the reality of the scene, the sensation of weightlessness, and the fact that I had voluntarily become conscious inside my unconscious mind. I have always been a vivid dreamer with high dream recall, and as a child I went through periods of sleepwalking. This new experience of being conscious inside the dream reality was tremendous, and I was instantly hooked.

**What methods did you use to become aware that you were dreaming? Has that changed over the years?**

At first I used the finding-your-hands method and then I became more adept at recognising dream incongruities and my own personal dream symbols and themes. Nowadays, the knowledge that I am dreaming is often there when I dream, just below the surface, so that it is far easier than before to come into a state of recognition, often for no identifiable reason. I just sort of 'remember' I am dreaming, and make the spring into full lucidity.

**As you began to have more and more lucid dreams, were there any lucid dreams that made a deep impression on you? Tell us about them.**

Several of my early lucid dreams made a strong impression on me. Here are a couple of the more memorable ones, which I don't have exact dates for but which took place sometime in 1994:

***Sleeping Double***

*I am at University, working on an essay which is giving me that stone-in-the-stomach feeling of boredom. My head grows heavy and I rest it on my arms, which are folded on my desk. Waves of sleep roll over me and I realise I absolutely must have a nap. Eyes still closed, I force myself to stand up, and slump onto my bed where I fall instantly asleep. After minutes or hours, a curious feeling steals over me: I have two bodies. I am simultaneously lying stretched out on the bed, and sitting at my desk.*

*I can feel the weight of my head on my arms, the coolness of the floor under my feet. And I can feel the bed under the length of me, the pillow under my head. This is most odd. I wonder whether I did in fact move to the bed, or whether I am still sitting at my desk. For what seems like many minutes, I experience this dual consciousness. There is some imagery; flashes of my bedroom with its colourful wall hangings and my desk strewn with papers. The imagery is as confusingly simultaneous as the physical sensation, as it is viewed from two different perspectives. I reflect that this must be a bizarre type of lucid dream.*

*I try to tip the balance between the two bodies and succeed in becoming mostly the body at the desk for a moment or two, while the body on the bed loses reality slightly. Since I am no longer sure whether I lay down on the bed or not, I cannot decide where my real body actually is. In the end, I drag myself from this pleasant but perplexing double state to see what's happening. It is hard to wake up as I am experiencing sleep paralysis. In order to get some mobile energy moving*

*around my body, I imagine I am wriggling my toes, and eventually manage to open my eyes to discover that my real body is... on my bed.*

### ***Ball of Light***

*One night there are drunk students in the corridor outside my room, and they wake me up. When I fall asleep again, I go directly into an exceptionally vivid lucid dream. I am standing in my room and everything is totally clear. I announce, "This is as real as reality and I am dreaming." As if in response to a password, a ball of light starts to form across the room by the wardrobe. I watch it swirl and then stabilise. It is beautiful.*

*The light coming from this ball is orange and yellow, and it has a distinctive female energy. I ask it what it is, and (without words) I am told it will always be there to help me in my dreams. If I need it, I just have to call. It then gives me some sort of power word which I know I'll never forget. Then it disappears. I stare at the place where it was, and experience a rush of joy which propels me up and out of the window. I fly on the cool air and shoot up into the stars. For a long time, I swing across the air currents enjoying the feeling of the wind on my skin and wondering at the startling reality of this dream. Then I wake up, and can't for the life of me remember the power word.*

### **What sort of questions did these lucid dreams or lucid dreaming create for you?**

Lucid dreams such as the above raised questions for me about the nature of reality and consciousness. I began to take an explorative and academic approach to lucid dreaming and persuaded my University - Lancaster at that time - to let me study lucid dreaming for an Independent Studies project while I lived in France for a year (1995-6). During this time I wrote several accounts of my lucid dream experiences in the Paris-based magazine *Oniros*, and was asked to appear on a French television show to talk about lucid dreams - an offer I had to decline, as I was not going to be in the country at the time they wanted to tape it. Once I had completed my degree, I took a six year break from academia during which time I continued to experiment with my own lucid dreams.

### **Briefly stated, your Ph.D. thesis involves 'investigating the link between lucid dreaming and the creative imagination'. How did your personal lucid dreams and outside influences lead you to this particular area of study?**

After my undergraduate degree, still intrigued by lucid dreaming and raring to try my hand as a writer, the first thing I did (after travelling around Thailand for three months) was write a novel which featured lucid dreaming as a means to eliminate nightmares. The writing of this novel taught me a lot not only about the nuts and bolts of writing full-length fiction, but about lucid dreams themselves. I developed techniques for weaving fictionalised versions of lucid dreams into the novel, and observed the ways in which lucid dreaming was opening up the fictional dream before my eyes.

I spend much of my time spinning stories from my imagination and creating vivid scenes in my mind's eye. When I first wrote fiction which centred around lucid dreaming, I grasped the inherent similarity of these states. The trance-like, guided daydream into which writers slip while they work, concentrating on something their inner eye is seeing, resembles the conscious gaze of the lucid dreamer who walks through her dream, observing or changing what she sees. In both states, the unconscious is directly accessed, and in both states, there is - or can be, if desired - a degree of control over events. Scenes can be modified or replayed, different outcomes explored.

Alternatively, the writer/lucid dreamer can simply sit back and watch while the unconscious directs the show.

For me, lucid dreaming and fiction writing developed hand in hand, each complementing the other. For six years, I travelled, learnt languages, wrote more practice novels, taught English, and considered lucid dreams and their link with creative work. Then I decided to further my explorations in an academic milieu, as this would enable me to go deeper into a subject that I felt was full of potential.

### **And how is the research coming along?**

It's coming along well, thank you, although it is fairly difficult to find case studies who are both professional writers and lucid dreamers - unfortunately for me, writers don't brand their foreheads with the words I am a lucid dreamer, which makes tracking them down problematic. For that reason, I have mainly found lucid dreaming writers through the content of their novels (i.e authors who have introduced lucid dreaming into a fictional plot), and not because they have stated in an interview somewhere that they use lucid dreaming to enhance their creative process. However, I have found an essential few, and I will also be drawing on my own experience of using lucid dreams in the plot of a novel and as an integral part of the creative process. Through my case studies of professional artists and writers, I am learning a great deal about art and writing and the states of mind which inspire creativity.

This PhD is a very sociable one, as it involves so much networking, so my research is really bringing me into the dream community. The vast majority of people have been very supportive of my endeavours and it was wonderful to attend the IASD conference in Copenhagen last summer and meet some of my contacts in person. The University of Leeds has generously offered to pay for me to fly out to California in a few months to present my research at the next conference, and I am very much looking forward to being there.

### **As you hear from lucid dreamers who have used lucid dreaming to produce creative work, like books or paintings, etc., what are you learning about lucid dreaming as a means to creativity?**

Lucid dreams appear to be active in the creative process, by providing inspiration and solutions to creative blocks, as well as cropping up in the theme of the creative work. Lucid dreaming appears to be a creative state of mind itself, and because of this, controlling the dream is not necessarily conducive to greater creativity.

I went through a period of intense experimentation with lucid dreams about nine or ten years ago where I almost always tried to control the dream action in some way, but in the years after my undergraduate degree when I was developing my creative writing, I found that I was far less likely to want to control my lucid dreams. Instead, I adopted the standpoint of conscious observer, and let the dream action continue of its own accord. I found that this passive observation led to interesting things. Either the dream would continue, often producing fascinating imagery, or else the 'dream furniture' would fade out, leaving me floating in thousands of dots, or bathed in colour. This lucid but 'empty' state is meditative and deeply refreshing, and it allowed my mind to open up and out. It strikes me as a highly creative state, akin to a hypnotic trance or a spell in a floatation tank.

Now, however, with the PhD research dominating both my day-thoughts and my dreams, I have started to experiment again in the spirit of my enquiry. That is to say, my experiments are

grounded in my research, so that I might set myself a task such as initiating a dialogue with my novel characters in my next lucid dream. I then incorporate my successes and failures into my research as appropriate.

Here's a recent example in which I try to experience synaesthesia in a lucid dream to help me get into the head of one of my main characters, a synaesthete. Months before this, I'd had a spontaneous experience of synaesthesia in a lucid dream, and that dream (recounted in another part of this edition of LDE) helped me to dissolve a creative block, as I wanted one of my characters to be slightly different but hadn't yet hit on how. After the dream I realised she was a synaesthete. The following dream showed me that lucid dreaming provides an excellent forum for experimentation, and it was interesting to note that I partially succeeded in invoking synaesthesia despite being a non-synaesthete. The feeling in this dream of waiting for tastes or smells to arise from touch will be of help to me when I describe fictional synaesthetic associations in my novel.

### ***Corduroy Strips and Coral Reefs (12/01/05)***

*I am underwater with M, breathing effortlessly. The coral reef is so bright and beautiful, and I am amazed that something so dreamlike actually exists. I watch the frond-like tails of fish swirl and hesitate inside tiny nooks and crannies in the reef before the fish emerge in a shower of bubbles. It occurs to me that this swirling hesitation would make a good writing metaphor and I play around at putting the images into words in my mind. There are blocks of turquoise and worn, rounded walls of rock. I want to take a photo and wonder aloud if we can use the digital camera. "No," says M, but I'm not sure it wouldn't work - it doesn't feel wet down here in this lit-up fairy world. "Just a quick picture," I suggest. "The camera will never work again if you do," he says, so I resign myself to imprinting all this beauty on my retinas and storing it in my memory without artificial help. I look, hard and strong, and somehow I realise this is a dream.*

*"Lucid dream," I say to M, and he smiles at me. "I'm lucid, I'm lucid," I say. I briefly consider synaesthesia and my research and novel, and suddenly I am standing in front of a wall of textured strips which I decide to touch to see whether any synaesthetic associations occur. I stroke my hand across the first one, which is hard and grainy, laid out in corduroy stripes. Stroking it is strange; it feels so real. It looks and feels brown and I ask myself what I taste when I rub it but nothing comes up and I reflect that taste sensations are fairly rare in dreams. I move on to the next texture. This one is soft and slightly furry, sort of like velour. "It tastes of porridge!" I realise. I love the feel of it under my fingertips, as it reminds me of childhood. I get so involved in stroking and tasting this texture-memory that lucidity starts to slip.*

*I remove my hands from the textured wall and raise them before my eyes, remembering how I'd performed that same gesture the day before, while giving a presentation at the university about lucid dreams. To my surprise, although I raise my hands with palms turned to my face, I only see the backs of them, and moreover they look smaller than normal and weird. I examine them for a moment, then walk to a mirror to my left and look at myself. I look normal (albeit a little pale, my eyes slightly distant, observing me observing myself), and I raise my hands again to bring them into the reflection. One is fine, but the other is clenched into a club-fist. With an effort of will, I remove it from the reflection, determined that when I bring it in again it will look normal. After several attempts, it is normal. I meet my distant gaze in the mirror and decide not to fiddle around with my hands anymore - I want to explore more of this dream. (...)*

*I continue with my explorations, going into different flats and looking at everything - bags made of hemp hanging off doorknobs, socks and jumpers littered about. At one point it occurs to me that this is so real that I could well have got my realities mixed up. "What if I'm out there in real*

*waking life, raiding other people's flats and insisting this is a lucid dream?" I wonder. "But I can prove to myself anytime that this is a dream, by jumping into the air and floating or flying. That just doesn't happen when I'm awake." And so I jump off the ground and fly up through another wall and I have proved my point to myself and know I am dreaming but there is still that lingering distraction, the idea that all this could be happening in some parallel universe, a solid Clare breaking the rules of gravity, passing through walls, ghosting through other people's private space, just a pair of lucid, wondering eyes... I lose lucidity.*

**Often, when we have a 'moment' of inspiration in our waking life, the feeling involves a sudden new perspective on a situation. One could call it the 'Eureka!' moment. Do you think this mirrors the process in dreaming when we suddenly become aware that 'this is a dream!' and gain lucidity?**

Sometimes, the realisation that I am dreaming is not qualitatively different from the realisation that it's stopped raining outside and the sun has come out; it's a pleasant little realisation, but there's no 'Eureka' to it. This often happens when I am not particularly surprised to discover that I am dreaming. Also when I fall asleep and go straight into a lucid dream, there is no sudden moment of realisation, as my consciousness of the situation is there from the start.

However, I think that one's perspective naturally shifts when the taken-for-granted reality of the dream is shown to be illusion, particularly when lucidity is unexpected, and this shift in perspective could well be compared with moments of inspiration. For example, there are moments in the writing of a novel when an obscure strand of narrative slots beautifully into place with no apparent help from me; the unconscious finally lets me in on the secret, and I fling my arms to the sky and say, "Ah, now I see where this is going!" From that moment, my perspective of the work-in-progress operates on a different level of understanding.

**This may be one of those 'chicken or egg' type questions, but do you feel that lucid dreaming enhances one's creativity, or instead, is the conduit to higher creativity or the source of creativity?**

I personally think that lucid dreaming is one of many creative sources, and my case studies have demonstrated that lucid dreaming can enhance creative ventures, so perhaps 'both' would be the easiest answer to that question!

**Any surprising responses to your research on lucid dreaming and creativity?**

I was fairly surprised to discover that none of my case studies seemed to have ever considered the idea of dialoguing with fictional characters or the subjects of their artwork while lucid in a dream, although most people said they thought the idea was a fascinating one and would be trying it in the future - so that's something for me to follow up.

**If an aspiring author or painter asked you how to best use their lucid dreaming abilities to assist their creativity, what advice would you offer them?**

I wouldn't presume to know the best ways of using lucid dreaming to assist creativity, as I think it depends on the individual; their working process, the effects they strive for, what they feel their work lacks or exaggerates, and so on. What is emerging from my case studies is that different artists prefer different techniques. Some take an active approach, striding through their lucid dreams collating images for use in their artistic endeavours, or inventing poems on the spot as soon as they become lucid. Other artists and writers prefer a more passive approach, and simply

observe their personalised archetypes and dream images as they arise, or let the dream action sweep them along. I personally find that 'becoming just a pair of eyes' in a lucid dream is a powerfully creative experience, because if you slow down and watch closely, you can see the moment where thoughts morph spontaneously into images.

**For many of us in North America, we became aware of lucid dreaming through the work of Dr. Stephen LaBerge, or Carlos Castaneda, among others. In England and the rest of Europe, how are dreamers becoming aware of lucid dreaming?**

Many people have lucid dreams for years before stumbling across the nomenclature, but I think that since it is widely acceptable these days for people to talk about their dreams, awareness of lucid dreaming is spreading through word of mouth, the Internet, and the fact that more books on the subject (fiction and non-fiction) are appearing in book shops and in online foyers such as Amazon.com.

**Are there lucid dream authors whom we normally don't hear about in the States? Any that you would like to recommend?**

Frederik Van Eeden and George du Maurier have written novels about lucid dreaming, but it has to be said that their novels, although interesting, are old-fashioned and don't exactly make for light reading.

**When you look back over your life, how has lucid dreaming affected it? Has it altered your perspective? Enhanced your creativity?**

Lucid dreaming has done both of these things. It has widened my perspective by introducing me to a state of consciousness which provides endless entertainment and solace. In my lucid dreams, I get closer to my own unconscious processes, I see my dreaming mind transforming ideas into images, colours, and sensations. I can simultaneously play the role of observer, discoverer, and creator. Lucid dreaming has certainly enhanced my creativity, providing a subject for my collages and fiction, and showing me that there will always be new ideas, new impulses. The dreaming brain is constantly searching for the weakest links, creating original metaphors, and merging memories with imagination. I can't see inspiration ever drying up as long as I remember to look to my dreams - both lucid and non-lucid.

For me, lucid dreaming is always worthy of further exploration; it's an area into which one can always push deeper, put out feelers in different directions and discover something new, rather like deep sea diving, or travelling... or writing fiction.

**Thanks, Clare, for your insights into lucid dreaming! Good luck with your research. For lucid dreamers who have produced professional creative work such as a painting, novel or short story, etc., how could they contact you to assist with your research?**

Thank you, Robert, for your support and interest. I am currently looking for professional novelists and short story writers who draw on lucid dreaming in the creative process, or who have centred a fictional plot around lucid dreaming. I can be contacted by email at

phdcasestudies@hotmail.com