

DREAMTIME

M A G A Z I N E

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Consciousness, Dreams and Beliefs: The Nature of Personal Reality*

Don Middendorf and Sayter Selter

The academic program

Promoting dreaming as a life-path was a central goal of our undergraduate program, *Consciousness, Dreams, and Beliefs: The Nature of Personal Reality*, at The Evergreen State College this year. Evergreen was founded on a unique philosophy valuing interdisciplinary learning and co-teaching, providing the rare opportunity for two dreamers to come together and teach our passions in a meaningful way. We, Don Middendorf and Seyta Selter, the co-faculty (and both IASD members), have largely formed our own lives following our dream-paths. Thus we were eager to offer students a worldview that values dreams and expands beliefs about consciousness, self, and reality. Students report that their learning was profoundly transformational.

Our program was full-time for students; it was the only class that our 40 students took for six months, with 16 in-class hours and 32 hours of homework per week. It was more than a full-time job (for us, too), requiring rigorous study and experiential practice related to dreaming and consciousness. The unique structure of Evergreen allowed us to use a fully interdisciplinary approach and to dive deeply into our exploration of dreams, consciousness, self, and beliefs. Students earned the majority of their credits in Psychology of Dreams and Consciousness Studies, with additional credits in Philosophy of Science, Contemplative Studies, and Psychology of Belief.

We led students through a six-month odyssey that began with foundational perspectives and culminated in a study of expanded states of consciousness, dream telepathy, and the philosophical implications of quantum mechanics, including the role of choice in selecting from probable realities. Each aspect of the program was interwoven with the next and evolved toward broader worldviews and applications to daily life.

We started with Van de Castle's *Our Dreaming Mind* to get a wide-ranging view of dreams from cultural, historical, and psychological perspectives.¹ Students met in dream groups to explore and analyze their dream reports using various approaches. The last few chapters of *Our Dreaming Mind* discuss research on paranormal, prodromal, and lucid dreams. These ideas prepared students to continue with Waggoner's *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self*.² Most students were thrilled to learn how to explore their own dreams with a much-enriched viewpoint of what dreams are, what they are about, and what we could use them to do.

Simultaneously, we looked at current ideas in the field of consciousness studies using Blackmore's *Consciousness: An Introduction* which provided a good overview of topics such as perception, unconscious processing, and models of self.³ After discussing brain-based approaches to studying consciousness, this text examines altered states of consciousness, extraordinary experiences, and first-person approaches such as meditation. Students kept a journal of their exploration of their own attention or awareness using experiments suggested in the text. Many students found that a side benefit of their meditation-induced improved attention skill was an increased frequency of lucid dreaming. A program highlight was the poster session day, in which students describe their experiences while following their own plan for exploring a



number of contemplative practices. Later, we attended a weekend workshop on Tai Ji and eastern philosophical perspectives on consciousness, and had a guest workshop on dreaming and somatic meditation by South African Xhosa Sangoma (shaman) John Lockley. We also examined consciousness in both animals and plants from Narby's perspective of an anthropologist living with Amazonian peoples.⁴

Our last text was Lipton's *The Biology of Belief* which reinforced the importance of the expectation effect in dream experience as Waggoner had emphasized in his lucid dreaming book.⁵ We encouraged students to discover their own beliefs in a variety of areas as a method for obtaining greater self-understanding, creating a more fulfilling life, and helping in interactions with others who hold differing beliefs.

Our Background

Our personal histories informed our curricular choices. In 1996, Seyta transferred to Evergreen to take Don's year-long full-time *Awakening Mind-Spirit* program. We studied Van de Castle's then-newly-released *Our Dreaming Mind* as well as Fred Alan Wolf's *The Dreaming Universe* which Seyta loved then, and suggested we use again this year.⁶ Wolf explains some ideas from modern physics such as the observer effect, entanglement, and nonlocality, suggesting that these ideas may help us understand both consciousness and dreams—as he did in his keynote address at the Berkeley 2012 IASD conference. These concepts allowed many students to consider some of their dreams from a more expansive model of a multidimensional self, with activities and experiences in other mental or even physical frameworks.

While Robert Waggoner was visiting our class this year, Don found some of his dreams that they had shared as part of the "Lucidity Project" in 1985 as participants in a three-year exploration of co-dreaming.^{7, 8} Each month, the 20 participants would incubate a particular goal. One night's goal was to "activate a past or future event" and Don's comments on his dream to the group indicated that the dream was probably related to his goal of teaching about dreams, but he was "sometimes having troubling imagining" how to do this with his training in the more "official" sciences of physics and biology. Even though he was unaware of Evergreen at the time, just one year later, he was teaching at this innovative college that allows for multidisciplinary learning—even between such seemingly unrelated subjects as physics and dreams.

The ideas and dream journaling in the *Awakening Mind-Spirit* program transformed Seyta's way through the world as she continued keeping a dream journal. After following her dreams through a first career in fashion design, she realized that dreaming was the root of her life's calling, and she reached out to Don about teaching at Evergreen to try to give back and emulate the impact his teaching had on her developing mind when a student. It was a long-shot, but with his encouragement and using the well-practiced belief system ignited by Don's mentorship (that included believing in the power to create), Seyta joined the teaching team with a fresh Master's degree in East-West Psychology and an interest in cross-cultural perspectives on dreaming and consciousness.

We came together from opposite ends of teaching experience to provide a unique and transformational program. Over his 30-year span of teaching, Don has had the pleasure of co-teaching about dreams with scientists, visual artists, a dancer, a photographer, a musician, an ethnomusicologist, and a historian of consciousness. Seyta's inclusion in this year's program brought fresh energy as a new teacher teaching alongside her own mentor. She added a focus on embodiment and cross-cultural perspectives.

Impact on Students' Lives

One of our aims in sharing our program experience with you is to illustrate how an interdisciplinary immersive educational framework can support the study of dreaming and consciousness. Most students finished our program with a much broader view of life and its potential than



when they entered, and with the ability to use dreaming as a tool to easily access personal empowerment and modify limiting beliefs. As the program progressed, students bonded over their dreams and emerging belief systems. Sharing frequently in seminar discussions, students experienced inspiration from their learning community and improved dream recall. One student who struggled with recalling dreams in the beginning even had two of his life-enhancing lucid dreams published in the *Lucid Dreaming Experience* this summer.⁹ Another student attended the Anaheim IASD conference and even won a prize in the dream art contest.

How would our world be impacted if there were more programs like this available for students? Based on our experiences as student and teachers in these areas, it is clear that the impact of learning a variety of concepts in dreaming and consciousness, and practicing them, is life-changing to young minds. We are grateful to both our courageous students and to the founders of Evergreen who allowed for such a non-traditional academic path.

Student Reflections

At the end of each quarter, students wrote a self-evaluation of how they approached their learning. We have excerpted a few of their comments below.

“I wasn’t aware of how much the course was going to stretch my Self conception, my views of health, and the fabric of my personal reality.”

“This class has made me really take a step back to look at myself and truly ponder questions that I might have never asked. Am I a continuous being and will my spirit go on after I die? Or am I just a bundle of my experiences? Who is I, what am I like, what is it like to be me? How much does what I believe affect what I do and how I do it? Am I conscious now? These questions along with many others have really made for an interesting class that has consisted of mind boggling concepts that I will continue to ponder for as long as I can.”

“What I found by committing attention to my dreams has been priceless. I have already planned to make the practice of documenting my dreams, participating in dream groups, and doing dream inventories into a regular practice. By doing so, I will be more in touch with my body, my unconscious and my dreaming reality.”

References

1. *Our Dreaming Mind* by Robert Van de Castle
2. *Lucid Dreaming: Gateway to the Inner Self* by Robert Waggoner
3. *Consciousness: An Introduction* by Susan Blackmore
4. *The Cosmic Serpent* by Jeremy Narby
5. *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness* by Bruce Lipton
6. *The Dreaming Universe* by Fred Alan Wolf
7. *Mutual Dreaming* by Linda Lane Magallon
8. *Group Dreaming: Dreams to the Tenth Power* by Jean Campbell.
9. <http://www.dreaminglucid.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Revised-2017-June-LDE- for-Web.pdf>

Don Middendorf enjoys teaching at The Evergreen State College and has taught programs emphasizing physics, biology, and mathematics, as well as dreams and consciousness studies. He and his colleagues formed the Consciousness Studies planning unit to offer an ongoing curriculum in the study of consciousness, mind, and dreams. middendd at evergreen.edu

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* The subtitle of our course was an homage to Jane Roberts’ book, *The Nature of Personality Reality: A Seth Book*. In the original publishing of this article, this important reference was omitted.