*Perhaps the first paper I ever wrote about mental health was in college about the similarities and differences between the mental states of people with schizophrenia, people who used psychedelic drugs, and people who became enlightened by meditating. I don’t remember what I came up with back then. I do remember that there wasn’t much in the Caltech library to help me. Although I’ve learned more and more since then about all three groups and still think they interrelate, I continue to feel like I’m barely, tentatively, scratching the surface.*

*One of my goals in retirement is to expand my consciousness without endangering myself physically. In the past, I’ve had some amazing personal experiences with intuitive healing, Rieki distance healing, Buddhist meditation, and Insight Dialogue. I’m pursuing these further, along with Animism and Shamanism, while avoiding psychedelics, hyperventilation, and fasting.*

*I’ve noticed that some of my teachers are entirely experiential and “intuitive” while some create elaborate explanations about what they’re experiencing and teaching, even writing books about it.*

*I’m in the second group. As I’ve experienced a larger reality that has gone beyond our normal understandings, I’ve added to my considerable scientific and psychiatric education with lots more reading, and created more and more elaborate, speculative explanations of how consciousness and reality work. Unfortunately, sometimes all that thinking can get in the way of my intuition and just experiencing things, but I think that as long as I don’t get overwhelmed, it does keep me saner,.*

*Last year I was contacted by a social work student in Scotland who had read my book about psychosis and wanted to know what I thought about integrating spirituality and psychotherapy. She has put together a small, international learning group. I wrote this article to explain to her my various theories. It’s very much a work in progress. You’ll likely have to suspend some disbelief to get through it.*

**What’s Real?**

**(2025)** by Mark Ragins MD

“*Psychotics drown in the same deep waters that mystics swim gracefully in”* - Joseph Campbell, professor of collective mythology.

Is he correct?

How about “creatives” or people using psychedelic substances?

What are those deep waters?

I’ve been trying to address these questions my entire life and I think I’ve made enough progress at this point to put forwards several assertions, or hypothesis, that together form the skeleton for a structure to understand what’s really going on.

1. Consciousness is not located in a control room somewhere in our brains. Like most of our “mind”, It is an “emergent property” of the complexity and connectedness of life.

Our scientific, rational understanding of reality really begins with the physics of electrons, protons, and neutrons. When they combine and connect in different ways the diversity of the atomic table emerges with an array of properties. When those atoms combine and connect into molecules a further array of properties emerges (like H2O is wet), and if other molecules are dissolved in water (combined and connected), acidity, buoyancy, conductivity, etc. emerge too. When very complicated molecules connect and combine, life emerges. When life connects and combines, consciousness emerges. Beyond that scientific rationality seems to fail us again. None of the emerging properties can be scientifically studied reductionistically, because they disappear if you simplify the complexity, break the connections, and examine the lower level. (Modern reductionistic psychiatry especially struggles with this methodological limitation – defining underlying biological “illnesses” makes the complexity, individuality, and connections, that are needed to understand and heal suffering people, disappear.)

Consciousness is not “yes or no”, it’s “more or less” depending on the extent and quality of the complexity and connectedness it’s emerging from. Our planet likely has more consciousness than a human which has more consciousness than a sheep, which has more than a fly, which has more than a bush, which has more than a bacterium.

This conception of consciousness implies we live in an “animistic” world, filled with consciousness. Currently we are too restricted and distracted in our focus to interact with our animistic world, even though most people could in the past, and some people can now, especially in indigenous cultures.

Connectedness can be created by direct perception, projection, reflection, or communion, all of which vary widely.

* Perception is experiencing by observing the outside other. This can include a plant phototropically sensing light and moving towards it, and a person deeply listening to and understanding another person.
* Projection is experiencing the outside other by attaching our internal world and expectations to them. This can include someone believing someone else is in love with them because they imagine it to be true and feel loved, and thinking that a shark is friendly because it is showing its teeth in a smile.
* Reflection is taking a perception and bringing it back inside to observe how it impacts our inner world and expectations. This can include being inspired by someone else’s actions to bring out the best in ourselves, and to alter our prejudices because of our experiences.
* Communion is experiencing a holistic union between our internal world and expectations and the outside other. This can include being in love, or less dramatically, being “in tune” with another, and accepting God into our lives, or less dramatically, being in awe of a beautiful sunset or moved by a piece of music or art.

Developing these various forms of connection, and being able to distinguish between them, “discernment”, are tools for expanding our consciousness.

1. Each individual human’s relationship to the living consciousness of our planet, or even larger, of our universe, is roughly analogous to a cell’s relationship to the human body it’s a part of. Like us, the cells are likely far more aware of their own stimuli and responses, their immediate environment, and neighbors, and survival needs, than of the working of the entire body and their place in it.

Rationality is a better tool for understanding those immediate, personal concerns than for understanding global or cosmic concerns. Traditionally, we have tried to improve our understanding of global and cosmic concerns by anthropomorphizing them into Gods and Goddesses, so we can apply more intuitive or emotional skills.

The “primary process” mind that works in intuition and emotions, expressing itself in symbols and metaphors, that is usually repressed into unconsciousness by our rational mind, but escapes in dreams, psychosis, creative and inspired states, and a variety of pathological and drug induced states, is our most direct experience of global and cosmic reality (Campbell’s “deep waters”). Not only are those states “irrational”, they can be transcendent, for example, predicting the future or knowing what’s happening to someone far away or tapping into ancestral knowledge. They “transcend” our immediate, personal concerns connecting us to global, common concerns. (It’s possible that the reason we absolutely need to dream is that we need to connect with global and cosmic reality, without being hampered by rationality.)

1. Each of us have built into us the ability to develop our consciousness, by increasing our complexity and connectedness. Our development can be facilitated our hampered along the way by inherent differences, our environment and culture, our adaptations to disruptions, and seeking growth.

Commonly described stages include

* 1. Personal consciousness – realizing our body and our thoughts are ours, developing a coherent self-image, and rational, utilitarian view of reality
  2. Interpersonal consciousness – realizing other people have their own personal consciousness different from ours, developing some empathetic abilities, and loving connections. We have to lower our personal, rational, self-protections, becoming vulnerable, to connect to other individuals around us.
  3. Global consciousness – realizing there is a larger global consciousness that encompasses us all, that we are a very small piece of something very big, that our will is constrained by our fate. Synchronicities, inspirational muses, spiritual peace, etc. can emerge. We have to lower our personal conceptions of reality and personal attachments, to achieve “compassionate detachment” to connect to our natural planet and the cosmos.
  4. Timeless consciousness – dissolving of self, realizing time is subjective, death is an illusion, eternity is in every moment.

To progress forwards from each stage to the next one, requires lowering the boundaries and defenses that were used to create and strengthen the stage we’re currently at. I believe that a significant source of what we call mental illness is being stuck in our development, and suffering as a result. Getting unstuck and restoring growth and development, by whatever means, tends to create recovery.

1. Love is experienced differently at each stage of consciousness, even though we use the same word.
   1. At the self-centered stage, love is possessive, or being possessed. It is heavily infused with bodily lust and sometimes aggression. There can be a sense of personal disintegration when separated form the object of our love. Trust, mistrust, and betrayal are “gut reactions” that accompany this level.
   2. At the interpersonal stage, love can be part of friendship or romance. There is an interplay between our hearts, including our “hearts going out to them” and being “heartbroken” when our love isn’t reciprocated or we separate. Gifts are given and received. Gratitude and appreciation often accompany this level.
   3. At the global stage, love feels universal and self-less. “Agape” is the Greek word and “compassion” the Buddhist word. This love can be experienced spiritually: “God is Love” and is unconditional “God loves all of us, even sinners”. It is often accompanied by peace and faith and experienced as a blessing.
   4. I’m not developed enough to have experienced love on the timeless level. The only description I can give is “our love is eternal”.

We don’t commonly separate out these stages of love, conflating them and integrating them (for example, “Our wedding blessed our union and our love for each other”), which makes it all very confusing. They may be different experiences of the same energy varying dependent on stage of development or independent energies.

It’s likely that the openness, and maybe the vulnerability, of love makes it a powerful facilitator of developing progressively higher levels of consciousness, but those same features make love susceptible to corruption and abuse, intentionally and unintentionally. More speculatively, it seems possible to me that the source of love

not within ourselves, but more cosmic and its purpose is our sustenance, healing and growth.

1. We largely perceive reality through our “five senses” and proprioception, synthesized through our brains, including an elaborate time creating ability. Underlying that perceived, synthesized, created reality (which is similar enough between individual people to get along in a “shared reality” for the most part) is another layer of reality.

That underlying reality is quite difficult for us to perceive directly (we have to use intuitive, holistic, or “energetic senses) or to synthesize (we need to use quantum understanding or primary process thinking).

It is likely that this underlying reality is a reality of probabilistic energetic gradients and fields, not material certainty. For example, my table may seem solid, but beyond my direct perception, it consists of numerous small atomic nuclei surrounded by mostly “empty space” containing a rapid swirling of probabilistic electron orbits.

We can try to understand what that means by thinking about two common fields - wind and gravity. We can’t actually directly see or feel wind or gravity, yet we know they exist and regularly interact with them. We infer their existence because we see and experience indirectly their impacts: The wind’s pressure gradients (or entropy gradients to be more specific) between gaseous particles, largely determined by temperature gradients, moves things next to the air, like leaves and the pressure sensing cells on our skin. Gravity’s attractive force between bodies, especially the earth and the rest of us, is also a gradient experienced indirectly as weight, falling, and proprioceptive forces within our bodies.

Beyond those two fields, there are multiple coexisting fields, which can be conceptualized as different frequencies of vibration, all around us. Besides air pressure and gravitational attraction, for example, there is sexual attraction, personal threat (getting “bad vibes” or “a bad gut feeling” or noticing the hairs on the back of the neck stand up in response to barely perceived threats), heartfelt attraction (love, compassion, healing), a need to personally express ourselves, attraction to other minds / ideas, and “divine” energy, for example. These are usually perceived and interacted with unconsciously unless we intentionally attune ourselves to enhancing our focus and skills within a particular frequency. (Unfortunately, our normal childrearing tends to discount and diminish these sensations and skills). But talented individuals can and do sometimes emerge, nonetheless. For example, elite athletes can be “in the zone”, some people exude charisma or are highly tuned to sexual energy, Reiki practitioners can do “distance healings”, “intuitive healers” can diagnose people holistically, artists of various kinds can be inspired by muses or dreams, and some religious people can give peace and acceptance through blessings. (In this context, the chakra system can be seen as a detailed conceptualization of using our bodies to tune into the most powerful and important of these frequencies, like a radio tuning in to various radio wave frequencies.)

Ordinarily we are focused on our materially sensed and synthesized level of reality which distracts us from experiencing more than fragmented, incomprehensible glimpses of this underlying reality. A number of exemplary people, from Buddha to Plato to Rumi to Mary Baker Eddy to Walt Whitman to Tesla to Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Einstein have devoted themselves, with stunning results, to understanding and connecting with this underlying reality. Traditional shamans also work in these realms

These connections and skills can even lead to a variety of experiences beyond rational, scientific understanding, beyond restrictions of time and space, which are often perceived as either miraculous or imaginary as a result. (Perhaps people were healed by touching the hem of Jesus’ garb because very highly organized, healing energetic waves passed from him through them. Especially if they were humble and open to him, in all their imperfections / “sins”, he could fill them with spiritually-based purifying energy, “blessing” them.)

Presumably these abilities are not just limited to humans. A quixotic example is that a unicorn may be a horse attuned to divine energies, with an open crown chakra, or a halo if you prefer, a “saintly horse”.

Once again, our consciousness can connect to, and use, these energetic waves either through direct and indirect perception, projection, reflection, and communion.

1. There is energy interrelated directly with all mass, as described by E=mc2.

We commonly call the energy interrelated with our physical bodies and our consciousness, our souls. We commonly call the energy that is exchanged between more than one physical body and consciousness, love. We commonly call the energy interrelated with the planet, or the universe, God. We commonly call the energy that is exchanged between our planet or the universe and ourselves, blessings.

We can attune ourselves to these various energies and their connections to enhance our experiences of them.

1. There are likely energies attached to emotions and spirits as well as to mass. Indigenous cultures and shamanism tend to describe these as Upper, Middle, and Lower Worlds (which Christianity adapted, and Dante further elaborated, into Heaven, Earth, and Hell). These worlds aren’t separated geographically. They are different energy states all around us. The Middle World, that we are best at perceiving, is where energy is attached to mass. The Lower World is where energy is attached to emotions and interpersonal connections. The upper World is where energy is attached to spirit. To interact with these levels we tend to anthropomorphize and zoomorphize the energy (for example into spirit animals and constellations of stellar gods), while interacting with them using our primary process minds predominantly.

Brains in states of crisis or ecstasy or drug altered or even attuning to different frequencies of brain waves, for example through drumming or dance, can be more open to experiencing nonmaterialistic levels. Multiple brains linked together empathetically can also alter the frequencies and open up higher levels (for example, the gospel verse, “when two or three of you are gathered in my name, I will be there”)

Traditionally, shamans actively move between these worlds on journeys usually for wisdom (knowledge beyond rational learning) and healing (beyond biological interventions). There are many examples of journeys in mythology and religion and even popular literature (Alice in Wonderland can be considered a journey into the Lower World and The Wizard of Oz can be considered a journey into the upper World, both featuring a young girl integrating wisdom and healing from other levels of energy into her normal life experienced in the Middle World.

I believe that humans have a key role in transforming energies from being attached to mass through emotions into spirit and the other way around in a constant flow (like water molecules constantly flowing between gas, liquid, and solid states).

1. The reality of these energies is only a probabilistic reality, a waveform. To be converted into our familiar material reality, a reality of particles, requires conscious observation and ultimately, choice.

This conversion process is extremely hard for us to understand, either rationally or intuitively, or even creatively or spiritually. We can, and have experimentally demonstrated it with the “two slit experiment”. In this experiment, a single stream of light is sent towards a wall with two open slits. As waves go through the slits they create a pattern behind the wall (you can imagine water waves going through two openings in a break wall creating a wave pattern on the other side of the wall). But if you observe the light waves before they go through the slits, they become light particles and the pattern disappears. Our observations literally convert waves to particles – converting probabilistic, energetic reality to discrete, material reality. (A speculative corollary is that dark matter and energy are unobserved by any consciousness and only exist in probabilistic reality as a result.)

This transformative power, which we all have and use all the time, literally creates our material world. This is how our decisions and our will alter our lives (within the probabilistic possibilities of underlying reality, our fate). This is likely the basis for ideas about the power of positive thinking and actualizing our intentions. This is also the deep meaning of the law of karma – we literally live in a materialistic reality, and its consequences, that we are constantly creating through our observations and choices.

But we’re connected to so many other consciousness that are simultaneously observing and creating reality, in effect interfering with each other, that we’re “co-creating” reality. To the extent that we are internally fragmented or incoherent, we’ll create fragmented or incoherent realities. To the extent that we disconnect from our co-creators, we can become disconnected from shared reality. Presumably, these are two, often interacting, pathways to psychosis. Presumably, these are also challenges to creating art and challenges to integrating psychedelic experiences.

It may also be possible to actually shift temporal dimensions through our decisions (compare with the movie “Everything, Everywhere, All at Once”).

When our connections start failing, biologically with ill health and aging, or psychologically with loss of purpose, direction, and passion, or socially with fear, rejection, and isolation, our consciousness decreases and our ability to create our material reality starts failing. In our psychiatric understanding we call this psychosis, and if the deterioration progresses, schizophrenia. In our anthropomorphic spiritual understandings we call this losing our souls.

By the time we die, there may be very little connectedness left to carry on, just diffuse energy and mass, “from dust into dust.” We’d expect disruptions sufficient to end the connections and complexity that sustain life would generally also end consciousness, but there may be exceptions. Presumably, reincarnation is the extent to which any conscious energy field retains consciousness (from ongoing complexity and connectedness) after life ends. This may be most likely if the being’s consciousness is more highly attached to the energy all around it rather than limited to its own individual energies. This may be what we describe as “going to meet our maker” or “joining God in Heaven” or less dramatically as “I see your grandpa in you.” (Perhaps the Dalai Lama’s energy is so highly connected that his soul connects to a new young child’s mass and he is “reincarnated”. Perhaps Jesus’ energy was so connected to God’s that when he died it brought the mass along with it as he was resurrected.)

That’s my skeleton, including my hypothesis and speculations. I’m interested in hearing from other people, who are willing to go open-mindedly beyond our current paradigms to connect with my structure, create more complexities, and actualize it.