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Fully Awake

Transfiguration Sunday, c, Feb. 18, 2007
Luke 9:28-36

Did you see the comic strip *F Minus* in yesterday's Austin American-Statesman?ⁱ Extending the range of the more common experience of sleepwalking, a horrified employee is being pointed to and fired by her boss whose eyes are closed. Her co-worker is saying, "Don't worry, Sarah. He's just sleep-firing. He'll forget all about it.[when he wakes up.]

The same theme pops up in the what many believe to be the finest movie Charlie Chaplin ever made, *City Lights*. In it Chaplin saves a drunken millionaire from an attempted suicide and becomes his friend. Later, when the millionaire sobers up, he has no memory of Charlie at all. But the millionaire soon gets drunk again; spots Charlie, treats him like a long-lost friend and takes him home to his mansion. Once again, when sober the next morning, the millionaire forgets that Charlie is his invited guest and has the butler throw him out.

What Sarah and Charlie Chaplin were learning the hard way, modern day psychologists have come to understand more thoroughly. What these psychologists tell us is that much of our experience is tied to what state of wakefulness, attentiveness we are in when we first perceive something. I'm not talking "what mood" here, but a significantly different frame of mind. They say that some of our experience is state-bound.ⁱⁱ

Let me give an example. Alcohol is a common route to an altered state of consciousness and provides the best documentation of state-bound memory. Research headed by Herbert Weingartner at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda may explain the erratic actions of Charlie Chaplin's drunken millionaire. Weingartner's team wondered if we don't remember things in different ways when we are drunk or sober, so that a partial amnesia exists between these states. Weingartner had volunteers – an you know, I'm betting he didn't have a hard time finding these volunteers --, Weingartner had volunteers learn a list of 10 words, then asked them to recite the words when they were either in the same state, drunk or sober, as when they learned them or in the opposite state. The subject's recall was best when in the same state as when learning the words, whether drunk or sober.ⁱⁱⁱ Other researchers have shown that this rule of thumb also holds for altered states induced by amphetamines, barbiturates, and marijuana.^{iv}

Weingartner's study of state-bound memory suggests a general principle of increasing our memory of experiences. Since recall seems often to be state-bound, we should reenter the state we were in during the original moment if we wish to recall it.

Now this psychological revelation might be something important for us as Christians to help us understand why certain practices can be such a blessing to us. The reason that I suggest this is that these different states of consciousness, typically called Altered States of Consciousness (ASC), these different states of mind, arise not just because of drugs that get taken into our bodies, but anything that we do to take ourselves out of an ordinary way of perceiving the world.

Think of it. Our participation in worship creates an ASC, a very particular state of mind and spirit that we have come to know and appreciate.

If we wish to experience something like those powerful communion moments we have known in the past as we gathered here, we don't go shopping at Macy's to get it, or go head out to a Friday night football game. We come to this place again and allow ourselves to be drawn into that same attitude, that same atmosphere, in hopes of God touching us once more. And it is that enveloping spirit of worship that opens up for us the opportunity to experience that again.

You can tell how important that atmosphere is when it is broken. I hear that a number of years ago during Rev. Crain's tenure on the Sunday bats were flying here in the Sanctuary, not much worshipping was going on!

Likewise, prayer is only prayer for us when it changes our consciousness. Many of us find that without closing our eyes and intentionally calming our minds and opening our hearts, we can say the right words, prayer just isn't possible for us.

And listen to how we speak of our choir's music or hymns we sing that move us powerfully. We say that it is "heavenly," that it "transports" us. It takes us somewhere quite wonderful for which we give thanks.

Ask yourself this question, "Does God most powerfully approach us in the midst of our ordinary, work a day consciousness?" I think that the clear answer for most of us is "no." That's exactly why we carve out time for church. It's why we dedicate prayer time, why we go on spiritual pilgrimages, and spiritual retreats. Each of these breaks with the ordinary, opens up a special opportunity for God to do something extraordinary with us.

So, as you would guess, the Bible is chock full of accounts of these altered states of consciousness. One example of a scripturally common ASC is the experience of ecstasy. The Greek word, "Ekstasis" is the word

from which the English word "ecstasy" is derived. It means literally “standing aside from oneself, being displaced or over against oneself, and ordinarily there is a sense of amazement, confusion, or even of extreme terror.” It was used to describe the astonishment of those who saw the mighty works of Jesus (Mark 5:42, Luke 5:26), the awe of the disciples at the empty tomb (Mark 16:8), and the reaction of the crowd to Peter's first healing (Acts 3:20). The meaning of ecstasy is that one has been shaken out of her ordinary attitudes. In the Bible it usually denotes a state in which a one's ordinary consciousness has been suspended by God's action so that some new perception will get through. Thus, ecstasy was the word for Peter's state when he fell asleep on the rooftop in Joppa and God spoke to him (Acts 10:10, 11:5), as well as Paul's experience when he was praying in the temple and the Lord spoke (Acts 22:17).^v I find it interesting that in the Bible, *ekstasis* may refer to either sleeping or waking experiencesor [what some call a TWIGHLIGHT state] that occurs on the border of wakefulnessfit the condition that *ekstasis* describes.

Now, you may have guessed, we have come to the brink of our scripture lesson from Luke for this morning. “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep” You’ve been there. Tired, sleepy, aching to rest—. Twilight consciousness, not really asleep, nor awake. Have you tried to drive a car in that condition? Do you remember how unsafe you knew you were? You have no business driving, making important decisions, or working on your relationship issues... when you are at the limits like this.

Yet were it not for their tiredness that evening, Peter, James, and John may have missed the Transfiguration of Jesus entirely. If they had given in to the temptation of sleep, they surely would have missed it. But what if

they had been fully awake as we normally use the words? What if their rested bodies had allowed their ordinarily rational minds to run their normal courses? Would they have seen the Transfiguration at all? I wonder.

Again, in yesterday's Austin American Statesman, there was an interview of Deepak Chopra, the Indian medical doctor and writer, whose presentations on spirituality and mind-body medicine are largely influenced by the teachings of Vedanta and the Bhagavad Gita from his native India. In a not so subtle barb thrown at organized religion he said, "although I do believe that religions were founded on spiritual experience...when you believe somebody else's spiritual experience, then you become religious without having any experience of your own..."^{vi} And goes on to say that that is a shame.

Not asleep, but not fully and ordinarily awake, in their sleepiness, in that twilight state of mind, Peter, James, and John got their own experience that evening on the mountaintop. It changed them forever. They knew who Jesus was. He would be their Lord no matter what. Nothing the world could ever throw at them now could take that deep knowledge away.

But what about you and me? Do we have our own religious experience, or do we just believe in theirs?

Late this spring or early summer, here at UCC we are planning to offer an intensive journal workshop that follows on the work of Dr. Ira Progoff. Progoff developed a fantastic set of personal journaling processes that takes advantage of this twilight consciousness to allow one to remember and recover elements of her past, to invite the work of the Spirit. Dr. Progoff once wrote:

"The nature of religious beliefs is such that on the surface level, they can be stated by the rational mind and interpreted by means of

intellect. But an inner experience of direct, non-rational knowing is essential in order to open the capacities of awareness at the deeper levels of reality to which the beliefs ultimately refer. And these experiences take place only along a track of consciousness that bypasses the intellect. These are the experiences that yield the kind of elusive knowledge upon which spiritual understanding is based, but only to a very limited degree do they follow the styles of reasoning that people are accustomed to use in their everyday life. The experiences . . . require us to have access to an additional aspect . . . of consciousness . . . additional to the rational mind.^{vii}

On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we enter the holy season of Lent. Lent is a time of preparation, of readying our spirits, of learning to trust God ever more deeply, recognizing that there are ways of knowing that transcend the intellect and rationality.

Two weeks ago Becca and I were flying back into Austin at nearly midnight from a highly cerebral conference in NYC where we had heard some of the brightest thinkers in the field of American theology speaking. As the plane began to land I was amazed by all the millions of lights aglow below. Streets lights, TV sets, neon signs, automobile headlights. All those lights were pushing back the darkness so that life need not slow down, get pensive, or face the mystery that darkness so often represents.

I mused that for most of human history and the entire history of the Bible, when evening came, groups of people would gather around fires to reflect on the day. In flickering firelight the world would take on another, possibly more threatening, but certainly more magical hue. And everyone would absorb it.

I was reminded of an experience many years ago as teenager, hiking one June evening on the Appalachian Trail in western North Carolina. As the evening's darkness began to settle in with another couple of miles still ahead of us on the day's planned hike, I reached in my pack for the flashlight I'd brought along. My friend's father who was guiding our foursome, said, "Put away your flashlight, Chuck. You won't need it. Just let your eyes adjust. You'll see fine."

And he was right. The flashlight would have given me a clear picture of the path 3 feet ahead of me, but I'd see nothing more. Adjusted to the darkness, I could see everywhere around me, not as acutely to be sure as with the flashlight on, but well enough. Better, in fact, to get the life-size picture of where we were in that big, beautiful world.

That was probably the only night that whole year I'd have been able to see a Transfiguration.

"Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory."

ⁱ Austin American Statesman Feb. 17, 2007

ⁱⁱ Roland Fischer, "State-Bound Knowledge" in *Consciousness: Brain, States of Awareness, and Mysticism* ed. by Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson (New York: Harper and Row, 1979) 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 97

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 102

^v Morton T. Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing Co., 1974), 82-83.

^{vi} Austin American Statesman, Feb. 17, 2007

^{vii} Progoff, Ira. *The Practice of Process Meditation*. New York: Dialogue House Library, 1980.