

Abstract Title: The dreamy state: an autoethnography of spiritual meaning in epilepsy

Presenters: Louise King, Elizabeth Roxburgh, & Chris Roe

A UKCP Psychotherapist in London, Louise uses transpersonal therapeutic methods including dreamwork and creative expression. She is a Doctoral candidate conducting research into transpersonal understandings of spiritual experiences in epilepsy, where she is also an Associate Lecturer. Beekeeper and nature lover, she enjoys archaeology and walking. And she has epilepsy.

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Elizabeth is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Northampton. Previously an Assistant Clinical Psychologist in a variety of settings, she is now a BACP Registered counsellor and volunteers for a charity organisation. Elizabeth was awarded her PhD for research exploring the phenomenology and psychology of Spiritualist mediumship and has also undertaken research on synchronicity in the therapeutic setting, counselling for anomalous experiences, noncontact healing, and therianthropy. She enjoys being in nature, looking for treasure at car boot sales, vintage stores, and geocaching, and tries to go to the gym but prefers chilling out in the spa.

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Chris is Professor of Psychology at the University of Northampton. He is Research Leader for the Psychology Division and Director of the Centre for the Study of Anomalous Psychological Processes. He edits the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, and in 2014 became the first person from the UK to receive the Parapsychological Association's Award for Outstanding Contribution to Parapsychology. His research focuses on understanding the nature of anomalous experiences and explores the phenomenology of paranormal experience, the psychology of paranormal belief and of deception, as well as experimental approaches to test claims for extrasensory perception and psychokinesis, particularly where they involve psychological factors. He keeps tropical fish, and is an avid sports watcher, particularly of horse racing and Preston North End football club.

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Abstract (300 word max):

Study of anything can sometimes drain it of its feeling, its blood (Moriarty, 2013); this ‘psychologising’ then loses a sense of the embodied individual (Muncey, 2010). In the hidden world of the ‘dreamy states’ of epilepsy, the Cartesian mind-body split is impossible. Some people with epilepsy experience ‘dreamy’ or ‘cosmic’ spiritual states (Dolgoff-Kaspar et al., 2011); they talk to God, or know the oneness of the universe. The medical model pathologises these experiences, regarding them as, at best, hallucinations (e.g. Sacks, 2012) and at worst, a symptom of seizure-associated psychosis (e.g. Dolgoff-Kaspar et al., 2011).

A personal crisis forced me to question my sense of self-identity and, in unravelling mentally, my body followed - my epilepsy became a concern. I was forced to look within to a defining condition that I had always rejected. I began to research individuals who find spiritual meaning in their epileptic auras where I have previously had none. My curiosity about ‘Other’ started me on a journey to re-defining and understanding of ‘Self’. I speak now as a researcher through and with my ‘illness’ (Frank, 1995) and wonder what is meant by health in this context.

I propose to present an autoethnographic paper that offers insight into how auto-ethnography enables me to employ a novel approach to engage with this altered state of consciousness – a waking dream technique (Hamilton, 2014). Through this approach, I can explore the specific character and intensity of the feelings that accompany these epileptic events (Trimble & Freeman, 2006). This autoethnography will present the layers and voices of my narrative and the meaning my experience of epilepsy has in the criss-crossing of my personal and societal roles as researcher, student, woman, patient, psychotherapist. Auto-ethnography will allow me to give voice to this experience - indescribable by medicine (Frank, 1995).