

A tickle away from divinity

By Ruth Ostrow

SEVERAL times in my life I have had what I would describe as a spiritual experience. My heart rate has risen, I felt energy shooting up and down my spine, and felt the presence of another in the room. The most notable was during a massage session a few years ago.

The masseuse, a lovely woman, asked me if I wanted to have a "sacred massage" to help ease my tension. I was a bit aghast having only just come in for a back adjustment. But I agreed. During the session, which I later discovered was an ancient Hawaiian healing modality, I went into a strange state -- half awake, half asleep.

In this space, a shadowy figure kept hovering in front of my eyes with a strong primitive face. He introduced himself to me and said that he was taking me on a journey. I felt myself lift out of my body, then we seemed to be going through several passages into the earth, past various animal forms, down through rivers and into the hollows of rainforest trees to the place of the souls.

I couldn't reconcile these images with my day-to-day life as a journalist. But I found that I couldn't forget them. Later, reading the work of anthropologist Michael Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, I realised I had been through a typical shamanic experience.

Harner explains that for eons mystics have been going on sacred journeys to gather wisdom and power. Some take drugs, others can alter their consciousness by simply listening to the rhythmic beat of tribal drumming, others by fasting or complete sensory deprivation in caves or the desert.

But in an altered state it is said that these shamans go to a spiritual "Lowerworld" -- either it is the shadow realms of the great unconscious, or as some believe, it is another reality that we can't normally access.

With this experience still fresh in my mind, I watched with interest the ABC program *Compass* last weekend, a show called *God on the Brain* which turned its attentions to a phenomenon known in medical circles as neuro-theology, where the brain and spirituality meet. The question posed was, is god all in the head?

Studies have proved that in experiences such as mine, certain areas of the brain are activated -- primarily the temporal lobes. People with temporal lobe epilepsy apparently have intensely religious experiences when they feel a godly presence around them; they see bright lights, and often have supernatural communications.

The show questioned the visions of our greatest seers and saints, even Moses in his experience with the burning bush, claiming that our religious icons may well have simply had temporal lobe epilepsy or highly-sensitive temporal lobes.

Furthermore, studies into meditating Buddhist monks showed that while certain areas of the brain light up with electrical activity during bliss states, a key area of the brain -- one that deals with self -- shuts down, enabling a spiritual feeling of merging with all things.

I recently wrote about a separate study that found certain chemicals were released in our brains during religious experiences. The potent psychedelic drug DMT -- used by various cultures to commune with the "divine" -- found in certain plants, has recently been found in the pineal gland during intense states such as birth, near-death, deep meditation, prayer, ecstatic dancing or singing, and some sexual practices.

When these chemicals are present in the brain we are transported into the spirit realms. While common wisdom calls it hallucination, at least one scientist recently suggested that the DMT acts as a sort of TV antenna which allows some sacred transmission to take place, opening us up to other dimensions or energies that are unseen in normal states of consciousness.

One of the medical experts featured on Compass seemed to follow this line, suggesting that evidence of temporal lobe activity during altered states in no way discounted the existence of god -- rather, it could be god's or nature's way of giving humans a pathway to the divine.

The most powerful point to come out of the program was this: studies have proved that people who believe in a divine presence are healthier and happier -- with less cancer and greater longevity than non-believers. Therefore it would stand to reason that nature would want us to be connected with our spirituality in order to increase our chances of survival.

Being a pantheist, it makes perfect sense to me that we have been hard-wired by nature to commune with god and that our brains hold the mechanisms for transcendence when stimulated by certain hormones and chemicals, electrical currents (from within or without), deep breathing or meditation.

The Compass documentary showed people in the experimental group putting on funny helmets that electrically stimulated those areas of the brain linked to religious ecstasy. And it occurred to me that with statistics now proving how healthy spirituality is for our wellbeing, it wouldn't surprise me if in the next century "temporal lobe helmets" become the new household vibrator of the future -- taking us all to new heights of bliss.

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