

Article

Secrets of the Extraordinary Ordinary: The Revelations of Folklore and Anthropology

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Abstract: The basic principle of folklore is constant—unveiling the hidden riches within the ordinary things of everyday life: a fine contribution to, and coordination with, the humanities. Examples are the study of the oral/orality; life stories of the obscure; practices of ‘hidden’ amateur musicians, studied ethnographically rather than through written scores or the ‘great’ composers; research by scholars outside the formal institutions of higher learning. An important new topic now being embarked on, in a scattered way, by folklorists and anthropologists, is the area known by such terms as ‘noetics’, ‘psychic studies’, ‘heightened/altered consciousness’, ‘the shared mind’, and the like. With a long history (too often disregarded in conventional scholarship) in antiquity, the middle ages, and eastern philosophies, this concerns such topics as dreaming; contact with and from the dead; experiencing music; and new, popularly but not academically acclaimed, perspectives on consciousness within innovative scientific thinking. Taking such studies further and, in particular, as folklorists and anthropologist have the capacity and interest to do, consolidating them into a new and fully recognized field of study together with linking this with endeavors across the disciplines, scientific as well as humanistic, will be of the greatest benefit for the humanities as a whole.

Keywords: humanities; folklore; anthropology; dreaming; music; consciousness; mind; telepathy; noetics; psychic

1. Folklore and the Humanities: A Fine Tradition

‘There is nothing new under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9): a saying that would no doubt be (appropriately) labelled a proverb, along with *Plus ça change plus c’est la même chose*—and many others on the same lines. As folklorists among others have pointed out there can be much truth in these ‘rustic old sayings’ (well, some describe them as such, I’d think myself they might be equally at home in business-speak, along with ‘More haste, less speed’ and ‘New heads on old shoulders’). And yes indeed we see the same cycles come round time and time again, new insights that, old, may still be felt as fresh.

There is scarcely anything surprising about this. It has always been so, even if under different labels. The contribution to the humanities of scholarship or, better put, of *understanding*, is indeed to show us the hidden in the thicket of the ordinary, the extraordinary that lies at the heart of our beating, living, human heart.

All academic disciplines, and, perhaps even more imaginatively, *non*-disciplines too have done and do this. No revolution is needed. From all of them, scientific as well as humanistic, empirically-based as well creative and imaginative, we find perspectives and findings that add to our understanding. Especially pertinent for this paper, they come from anthropology, psychology, from some history, and, centrally, from folklore. No change here.

But, I will argue, though the rivers, so to speak, remain the same and continue to feed the humanistic tradition or, in another metaphor, form the bedrock of our scholarly endeavors, they constantly develop new tributaries and run through new fields. It behooves us to notice these.

So what I will attempt to do is, first, illustrate some ways that in relatively recent years the humanistic disciplines and, especially folklore and anthropology (a vast overlap), have indeed contributed much to our humane understanding. And then I will go on to suggest something of a new stream, an expansive new—if controversial—floodplain, that is starting to be built up. It is one that, I believe, that we should endeavour, for our own sakes, for our particular disciplines and for the humanities generally, now to recognize and consolidate.

2. To Illustrate . . .

2.1. Change—But No Change

So—there is nothing surprising or, indeed, needing particular recycling or changing in the approach of folklore or anthropological studies. Of its basic principles that is.

For what do they do but look to the hidden, the pearl, in the taken-for-granted ordinary? And find there—and, increasingly, in elite ‘mainstream’ as well as ‘marginal’ settings—the precious, the unexpected, the heavenly *extraordinary*? That has been its ground from the earliest days to now: from Franz Boas (1955) and before, to Roger Abrahams (2005); Alan Dundes (1980) and Richard Bauman (1986) and much else. And countless others too within and notably (in folklore especially) *without* the academy, and many more too to follow. It is a rich approach and one that is also taken by many anthropologists (the preferred label in Britain) and by the best of the cultural historians, especially those exploring oral testimonies and historians of the left like Raphael (‘Ralph’) Samuel (1977) or Paul Thompson (2000), both of whom would indeed align themselves in part with folklore. We have learned so much from them.

The value of their contributions is that they have taken individuals, groups or cultural dimensions that have regularly been looked down on within the conventional (dominant) culture, or, really amounting to the same thing, mislabeled and hence misunderstood: the oral; popular music whether—at any given time—this happens to be the newly ‘romantic’, ‘crooning’ (how terrible that was once thought to be . . .), jazz, rock (not really ‘music’ to some, just ‘noise’); the lives of poor or immigrant or minority or ‘ordinary’ people; or attempts at research and understanding by the ‘uncredited’, ‘unauthorised’ and therefore (sic) incompetent individuals outside the academy. Strangely the politically or financially powerful too have tended to be sidelined, only fairly recently taken seriously as objects of study within folklore and anthropology.

Scholars, above all folklorists, have always been fascinated by the hidden processes of our lives and of the familiar: of what goes on beneath our everyday actions and our destinies, of which we are so often unaware—or unaware in our conscious minds at least; of the surprising underlying significance of people who are somehow wafted out of the general consciousness, and of things that, though wholly there, somehow escape notice. Sometimes, it seems, this is due to deep-rooted, often ethnocentric, assumptions; sometimes to the taken-for-granted vocabulary of our language, like the dismissive overtones of such terms as ‘amateurs’, ‘hobbyists’, ‘slum-dwellers’, ‘gypsies’, ‘aborigines’, ‘primitive people’ and the like. Sometimes it is simply about people that, like family historians or part-time musicians, we see everywhere in our ordinary everyday lives—but see them so often that they seem just a ‘natural’ and given part of our surroundings so not worth looking at let alone investigating or according credit to, even, in a sense, *reality*.

Such phenomena then are all around us, but it takes the eye of the folklorist or anthropologist to see them as worthy of study. This is, especially, where folklore comes in. In folklore above all we meet the constant advice, there from its very beginnings: ‘Start from where you are’—where you are in *many* senses. ‘Dig where you stand’, a similar dictum, is the slogan of the celebrated ‘Living Archive’ in my own city of Milton Keynes. This has amassed incredible mountains of material neglected by many of

the city builders but gathered by inspired collectors, few of them academic in the normal sense, about the arts not of the faraway ‘them’ that have, understandably, attracted so much scholarly interest over the last centuries but of ‘ordinary’ inhabitants—including ‘us’—since its founding in the 1960s.

There is nothing unfamiliar, to folklorists at least, about all this. But to avoid ambiguity let me all the same illustrate it a little further, a necessary background to what comes later. Let me then, folklore-wise, start from where *I* am, or at least have been, and reflect on what directions my own interests—typical of those of many folklorists and inspired by their work—have taken. When I look back at the topics that have over the years attracted my interest I see that their choice has almost always revolved around the everyday, the neglected, the despised. I have been drawn to the hidden things of ordinary life that I or others were encountering every day but had to learn to truly *see*; then came the painstaking attempt to dig into what deeper meaning and, almost always (Dan Ben-Amos (1972) was right) the *art* that likely lies behind it.

2.2. The Hidden Ordinary—Some Examples

The first example comes from forms of verbal art that some would see—explain away indeed—as merely ‘folk’ lore (in this case a derogatory term), ‘tribal’, ‘popular’ ‘illiterate’. ‘undeveloped’ and so on—and so, self-evidently, *not* ‘literature’. Yes? What I and others found of course, once we *looked*, was the huge value of a new perspective that transformed, not the material itself (that did not change) but our own understandings, changing these ‘passive, uninteresting, products’ into art and literature (detailed in, to mention only a few from a vast roll of honor, Andrzejewski (1985); Bauman (1986); Chadwick (1939); Dos Santos (2004); Finnegan (1967, [1970] 2012, 1992) (many further references there); Foley (2002); Gerstle et al. (2005); Haring (1992); Lord (1960); Sherzer (1990); Tedlock (1972); Valdés and Kadir (2004) and a multitude of works on similar lines).

The same went for music and for the role of audition—*sound*—in human culture, both in the past and now, everyday. And what, again, *is* ‘music’: a text, a score? the works of (only) the ‘great’ composers of the past (why not the present and why not the ordinary part-timers?) the performances of nationally acclaimed and mass-circulated bands? Or, as I tried to show in *The Hidden Musicians* (Finnegan [1989] 2007), exemplified since by other distinguished analyses (Berger 1999; Cavicchi 1998; Walser 1993), we should also look to the humble ‘amateurs’ and the self-taught musicians who, too often disregarded, throng our cities. Once we look to on-the-ground ethnography not abstract theory or the dominant paradigms, and to the actual *practices* of actual people all this is unmissable—and not just in my own city or in the musical genres and ‘worlds’ there, but also, as was shown in the recent international conference inspired by this perspective (<http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/music/?p=1365>) potentially worldwide, and throughout history too (Blacking 1995; Merriam 1964; Sharp [1907] 2012).

And how about the ‘unprofessional’ part-time researchers like the family historians, amateur researchers and part-time hobbyists scrutinized in (Finnegan 2005) but so brushed aside by fund-givers and universities: surely they too have a role—a *serious* role, I mean—to play in the world of learning and discovery. It is to them we owe not just the *replication* of the content and approaches of what is going on anyway but new thinking and findings, including classic discoveries in astronomy and stunning new development in information technology. And how, one might add, would folklore have become established as a discipline without them? or dance studies? or ethnomusicology? or indeed quilting or proverb studies?

Or again, we can explore how ‘stories’—so ordinary, so everyday, yet so often somewhat invisible, or at any rate ignored—can whether famous or obscure, provide ways of understanding and in some contexts controlling people’s identities and lives—our own too (Bruner 1987, 2002; Burnett 1974; Cronon 1992; Finnegan 1998; Linde 1993; Personal Narratives Group 1989; Plummer 1983; Riessman 1993). The concept and practice of narrative is basic to our lives, our literature, our culture—but till recently storying was seldom sought seriously among the ordinary facets of our everyday lives. As I found when I looked into the amazing and often deeply moving life stories of dwellers in what is still seen as the ‘sink of all sink estates’ in my town of Milton Keynes, what rewards

there are for looking there as well as to the great literature and myths and poems so (rightly) studied in our schools and universities. Few if any of these tellers had ever before told their life stories—but they all knew the genre, knew how to do it, and wonderfully too, within the allotted span of one hour (examples in Finnegan 1998). And what hardihood, strength and suffering they contained. And what creativity and glory too. Again—ordinary lives, too little noticed, but the true stuff of folklore, of our humanity.

I have found the process of investigating and reflecting on these questions unexpectedly illuminating, revealing layers of meaning and influence that I was before unaware of—or if aware, it lay beneath the level of my, and I guess, many others' consciousness. And then, even beyond that, there seemed to be a secret world of enchantment that, interlinked with ordinary everyday life (and death), also lies there for us, hidden beneath our knowing awareness, somehow beyond time and space.

In all such studies we find, I think, a twofold perspective: to try to unveil, if only a little, aspects of the secrets (often the 'extraordinary', the 'magical', the hidden), that lie beneath and supports and to a degree explains the ordinary; and at the same time to try to reveal something of the prevalence, the 'ordinariness'—the *not* so very unusual after all, it is usually all around us—of what is often, for most of us, most of the time, unobserved.

2.3. Back to the Oral

Hence, to return to this, my—well not discovery exactly (rather to my surprise I found that several had been there before me in the nineteenth century, chiefly in France and Germany—further details in (Finnegan [1970] 2012, chp. 2)), but, rather, my recognition of the nature and riches of *oral* literature. Next of course came its exposure to the wider world of readers, not just those in 'the west' but elsewhere. The focus may have started from the classical world, from Native America and from Africa, but the implications turn out to be somehow universal.

It is worth saying a little more to elaborate this. Though this is to go over well-trodden ground, by now familiar in many circles, it has *still*, amazingly, not been everywhere accepted in humanistic scholarship. The controversial, sometimes misunderstood, implications of the 'term' 'oral' are partly responsible for this. Its prime dictionary meaning is 'using speech [only]', as opposed, say, to sign language. In this sense 'oral folklore /literature', exemplified in written stories, songs or proverbs, is distinguished from (unverbalised) material culture. But in another context 'oral' is taken to mean *anything* unwritten and perhaps 'traditional'—a sense which *includes* material culture and nonverbal communicating. Good scope for ambiguity here, worth sorting out (as is still not always done) in any publication relying on the terms 'oral' or (very common now) 'orality', and good cause for misunderstanding.

Such contrasts, furthermore, need care for they sometimes reflect less locally recognized folk distinctions (as presupposed) than unthinking western models of verbal 'text' as—self-evidently, it is supposed—differentiated from visual, auditory or bodily signs (an assumption underlying the long-entrenched, if controversial, and far-reaching contrast of 'orality' and 'literacy'—further discussed in (Finnegan 2016)). One of the themes in recent studies of orally-delivered art forms is that, though in one sense they center on *words*, in another they involve *more* than words: a performance perspective so influentially pioneered in works by such folklorists as Dan Ben-Amos (Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975); Dell Hymes (1975); Joel Sherzer (Bauman and Sherzer 1989); Richard Bauman (1986) and, from Finland, home many would say of folklore, Lauri Honko (2000), and by now well accepted in in both empirical and theoretical scholarship (El-Shamy 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999; Nelson 2001; Schechner 2006).

That dimension, still at times over-looked in the traditional humanistic focus on *text* (as in one-line one-dimensional visual hard-copy printed word), links into the way I found myself glorying in the multisensory delivery of Limba narrative in West Africa (Finnegan 1967) and the input of the audience (the last thing I would have expected given my text-centered background in the studies of classical antiquity). This hugely impressed and instructed me. It drew me inexorably—not from my reading or

my literary training but from Limba practice, and then, indirectly, from my Irish upbringing—digging where I stood—to the notion of performance.

I had to start from my *own* observation, taught by African experience. But then what a joy to discover the American and Scandinavian work within folklore referenced above. This was an insight that in due course led inevitably to my focus in *The Hidden Musicians* on contemporary *everyday practice* rather than, as so often in the past, on Great Men, history or written score in its dry, unperformed, dimension. Nowadays of course, to the benefit of humanistic scholarship, we are able to see the extraordinary of musical performance even among the ‘hidden’ amateurs, even among the ordinary not-so-very-good practitioners, as in the works cited earlier, and many many others. The insights have been of great benefit not only most obviously, in classical and mediaeval studies but in the study of poetry, song and written literature all around us. Joining with reception studies and, by now, the spread of audio books, it is now so much more widely recognized that we can look to the significance of literary works, even those originally conceived as having their existence in *writing*, of being *read*, above all, like those of earlier centuries, being *read aloud*.

There is hidden artistry in these works and along many dimensions, just as, it is now increasingly being revealed, we can see creativity not just in overtly ‘literary’ texts but concealed in popular oratory, in the verbal genres and sayings we take for granted, in the gestures that, unnoticed, accompany and, inform our words, and in the ‘ordinary’ informal language of everyday speech (exemplified in, among others [Duranti 2009](#); [Finnegan 1992](#); [Holmes 2008](#); [Sims and Stephens 2005](#); [Klassen 2004](#); [McNeill 2000](#); [Mieder 2008, 2009](#); [Morris 1999](#); [Peek and Yankah 2004](#); [Pope 2005](#); [Pope and Swann 2011](#); [Poyatos 1992](#); [Sherzer 1983](#); [Streeck 1994](#); [Streeck and Mehus 2004](#) (a truly wonderful account); [Yankah 1989](#)). It is a stunning revelation of hitherto well-kept secrets that are indeed extraordinary and wonderful. What miracles the human spirit is, so quietly, capable of, How can we doubt this fine contribution of folklore and allied studies to the understanding of our human-created world, to humanistic scholarship?

So in a way folklore never changes—dig where you stand and reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary, despised or neglected, things of human life. That remains the same and long may it do so; essential if sometimes disregarded contribution to the humanities. For what do the humanistic enquirers do but explore the hidden background and foundation that, if we will but look dig—as have so many scholars of the past and present, not least of course coming out of the strong tradition of precisely this among folklorists—into the everyday ground to reveal the hidden surfaced of surprises on which we stand (as among a host of others and all on wonderfully different ways, have [Ben-Amos \(1972\)](#); [Bendix and Hasan-Rokem \(2014\)](#); [Briggs \(1985\)](#); [Cooper and Devonish \(1995\)](#); [De Certeau \(1984\)](#); [Dundes \(1980\)](#); [Glassie \(1995\)](#); [Lefebvre \(1991\)](#); [Noyes \(2012\)](#); [Okpewho \(1992\)](#); [Silverstone \(1994\)](#); [Sims and Stephens \(2005\)](#); [Tracey \(1963\)](#); [Urban \(1988\)](#))?

3. Old Rivers, New Tributaries

What *can* and *does* change, however, is the subject matter; and, I would say, rightly so. New areas are constantly being if not conquered at least explored and thus, in a way, created: such is the power of the human mind. So here I want to suggest a new topic or set of topics that is now starting to emerge into the humanities. Well it is actually a very very old one. But it is indeed new in not yet being fully established in contemporary scholarship and, though widely explored and, actually, longed for and popular culture more generally and needed within the humanities, it is still regarded as highly controversial, in some circles, the highest too (as I know to my cost, myself) thoroughly taboo, even a reason, if you pursue it, for expulsion from many scholarly circles.

Some aspects, it is true, are beginning to be noticed. There is indeed some relevant work among anthropologists, folklorists and a few cultural historians. But for many humanistic scholars it is mostly only just beginning to appear over the horizon. It comes from several directions but, despite some brave pioneers, especially in one area (dreams, including those immediately prior to death), for the most part, as far as I can see, not many even within folklore have deliberately or systematically studied

it, or at any rate attempted to consolidate it with other aspects of what we might call psychic studies into an established field of research.

It seems to me however that it is precisely within folklore and/or (much the same thing) anthropology that it is most likely to be established as an integrated and productive field of studies. Folklorists especially with their ‘dig where you stand’ philosophy are in the right position to develop it. If that was achieved, it could be the next great step within the humanistic disciplines.

3.1. So What Is It?

What is it then and why am I shilly shallying about naming it? Surely this should be a simple matter?

The trouble is, just *because* this is not yet an established field of studies, so neither is there an established or standard vocabulary to identify it. There are a number of terms however (explored further, with follow-up references, in [Finnegan \(2017\)](#) final chapter ‘Then’), that hover, usefully, around the area. These include ‘noetics’/‘noetic sciences’; ‘psychic’ studies; studies of the ‘noosphere’/the ‘numinous’; ‘parapsychology’; ‘extrasensory perception’ (ESP)/the ‘sixth sense’; ‘nonlocal communicating’ (Stephan Schwartz’s preferred term); studies of the ‘other’ or the ‘liminal’ (familiar word in folklore studies)—and that is just to take those in English, there are many more recorded from so-called ‘traditional’ cultures and in eastern thought where the subject has been much more explicitly developed.

To get at it another way, more concretely, it involves studies of dreaming, of musical experience; of the ‘vibes’ felt in special circumstances or places; telepathy; the sense in which human beings, like a swarm of birds or bees or a school of fishes can act in a sense as at once many individuals and as one organism (well analyzed in what is now known as ‘swarm studies’—see for example ([Ballerini et al. 2008](#); [Gershon 2005](#); [Hayward 2017](#); [Luhmann 1982](#); [Sipper 1995](#); [Toner and Tu 1998](#))); or in the somehow ‘heightened’ or ‘altered’ consciousness we many people are familiar with in, for example, prayer, mystical experience, religious services, or listening to music.

These are far from abstruse subjects. Just to mention some specific aspects, the topics of dreaming, contact with and from the dead, and shared non sensory consciousness are popular subjects for discussion and. or debate. There is now a flood of best-selling volumes (there is a strong popular thirst for such subjects), many by hard-nosed senior scientists (even the American government and army take—and fund—telepathy research seriously ([Drummond and Shachtman 2015](#)), as do all armies of any size). The interest can be related to the contemporary commitment to religion and religious interest—not necessarily within established churches but to spirituality and emotion and an often-unrecognized musical effervescence that goes with it, both strongly connected to the study, or at any rate some vague awareness of, the nature of ‘heaven’, under whatever (perhaps metaphorical) name, and, so important nowadays, of ‘consciousness’.

Throughout the world too we nowadays see the proliferation of a growing number of centers devoted to the subject, and any army worth its salt is interested for its own (not necessarily high-minded) reasons in remotely controlled minds, Senior figures in science and arts propound its relevance of consciousness studies, readers flock to their ideas, in just about all disciplines journals abound with names like *Neuro-this*—and -that, *Paranormal-whatever*, *Cognitive-something*, *Parapsychology*, or *Consciousness*. Books and speculations about dreams, reliable and not, through the internet, books on telepathy and return from the dead rush into the best-seller lists, studies of telephone telepathy are pursued in university psychology departments (‘I was just thinking of you when the phone went . . . ’, ‘I *knew* it was you phoning, so did my dog . . . ’), experiments are conducted with all the greater rigour because of the controversies—, and even among the top research fund-givers ‘consciousness’ (never of course referred to as telepathy or ‘the extended mind’) has become a fashionable topic for scientific research and funding.

In consequence there are by now a plenitude of serious studies, anthropological and other, of the nature and images of dream-carriers, of twin communication and analyses in psychology, and research

into the brain. These are aided by the findings of and through MRI (their significance too often sidelined in the humanities); by neuroscientific and cognitive studies; and, from a different but equally rich direction, wisdom from Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism—indeed from eastern and ancient seers generally. In our own culture(s) we find candid biographies/ autobiographies such as Janis (2010) with their own insights into the non-local and non-everyday dimensions of their lives, studies of ageing and the widespread experiences of psychotherapy, and of hypnosis. The long history of Buddhist meditation, The Society of Friends' largely silent meetings for worship, of praying and its rewards, of the fashionable 'mindfulness', surprising value of colouring books, and the silent monastic orders also prove rich, if too often neglected, perspectives. The whole is helped on by the way that, in contrast to earlier, 'experience' and 'emotion' are, thanks to such works as Turner and Bruner (1986), no longer taboo subjects in the social science—a fitting dimension for what we are about.

If we want to take one possibly integrating concept, at the center of this, it seems, lies the notion of 'heightened' or 'altered' consciousness. This is something which, in one sense rather ordinary and, indeed, common, is at the same time rather special. It is consciousness—*real* consciousness albeit not primarily verbal (why should it be unless we insist of being bound certain short-lived western ethnocentric assumptions?)—of the kind we access in dreams, contact with the dead, awareness through some 'sixth' (nonsensory) sense, or that creative space in which we dwell when we feel the vibes of some sacred place; the experience of psychic awareness, inspiration, or perhaps beyond all, creating music or (in a way the same thing) listening to it—this, or these, experiences are all familiar in 'everyday life'. They are all too seldom explicitly recognized as fit objects for scholarly study. And yet all the time they are there, brushed aside perhaps—the fate of too many folklore-related topics in the past—as too familiar to study.

Let me take some concrete examples to illustrate the kind of consciousness, the feeling of delving into, dwelling in, some ethereal liminal domain, that I am talking about.

3.2. Dreams

We can start with the empirically attested and widespread experience of dreaming, a constantly recurring mode of experience throughout history as throughout life. This is indeed an aspect that *has* attracted some scholarly attention, even its own specialist term (Greek derived naturally), 'oneirology'. In dreaming above all, it seems, often with even greater immediacy than the experience of death, telepathy or even music, we humans have long had a recognized entry to the entrancing experience and consciousness of the noosphere.

Few of those educated in a western tradition will fail to recall *Kublai Khan* and 'the man from Porlock' who interrupted Coleridge's dream-memory. Not so many know that Montezuma was led by dreams and divination, and writers from mediaeval saints and scholars to Mark Twain in more recent times have famously been inspired by dreams. Einstein too, it is said, and perhaps Newton and Descartes, not to speak of earlier philosopher-scientists east and west, 'modern' and 'traditional', were influenced by dreams as much as by this-world everyday science. In political life too. Churchill insisted, no doubt to his aides' despair, in getting undressed and into bed every afternoon and it was his dreams that guided his war policies; so too with Joan of Ark and Abraham Lincoln.

Classical and mediaeval authors took dreams seriously, if also noting their belief—how sensible—that false dreams could come through 'the gates of horn' as against the true ones from 'gates of ivory'. For them as for some modern scholars and many non-western cultures, dreams are less misleading falsehood than merely another kind of reality, albeit in a different mode of experience.

The subject, much studied in antiquity and the middle ages, lost something of its appeal in more recent centuries with the exception of the enormously influential and mind-opening psychological perspectives of Freud and Jung. By now the subject is receiving more attention, both popular (sometimes, but far from invariably, uncritical) and academic. It is being widely studied in a variety of such disciplines as psychology, anthropology, neuroscience and cultural history. Nowadays therefore anthropologists, psychologists, writers of literature and historians among others (though seldom in

contact with each other) have much to say about dreaming and its communicative and reflective power. Many cases have by now been documented, well-known too in antiquity, of the origins of literature, music and scientific theory lying in dreams—not just, as already mentioned, Coleridge's *Kublai Khan* but Milton's epics, my own novel *Black-Inked Pearl* (Finnegan 2015), Brahms' and Mozart's compositions, the theory of relativity, the double helix and, more mundane, the invention of the sewing machine.

Many people are reluctant to talk about their dreams. But there is now a plentiful if disparate literature on the subject (amidst a large literature see for example Abraham 1979; Barrett 2001; Basso 1992; Bulkeley and Adams 2009; Burke 1997; Devereux 1969; Edgar 1999, 2011; Freud and Oppenheim 2011; Harris 2009; Tedlock 1987 (a wonderful pioneering work); and the useful overview in (Vedfelt 1999)). From this it appears that dreams, and prophetic or 'extra-ordinary' dreams at that, are extremely common. In the last few years I too have certainly experienced dreams that lead me to, or rather find within me, some liminal domain beyond the ordinary. Speaking of my own experience frequently leads others to break their reluctance to speak of it from which I conclude that this is a common, though not universal (not consciously at any rate) phenomenon: they too have dreamed in a domain out of our ordinary time and space.

The dying, it has been observed, can be especially open to dreams, and powerful ones at that. These can predict, reassure, threaten, challenge, console, pose problems or somehow sum up a life and draw a line under dreamer's life. Sometimes these dreams come in the form of music, as in hearing the lovely negro-spiritual *Swing low sweet chariot*—a fitting ending to a life. Those who work in hospitals and hospices, above all chaplains and the dreamers' confidants, are well acquainted with such dreams, in some cases taking them as a subject of systematic study (for example (Bulkeley and Bulkeley 2005) and further references there).

From recent investigations (Baumann and Subsin 2017) it seems that such dreams are recognized in many cultures—European, eastern (including China and Thailand), and American as well as across a range of western and non-western originated religions. Such experience can be seen as inhabiting a kind of grey zone between telepathy, prophecy, and dream management in an area with several labels—such dreams are known across the world—but that have become widely known as *déjà-vu*: direct entry to the liminal mode of consciousness, beyond this world.

3.3. Death and Communicating

Death is the end is it not: a strong, at any rate overt, belief in our culture. But new views of consciousness as ever-enduring are emerging, together with work attesting the widespread experience of the soul or spirit or awareness of identity (whatever you might like to call it) surviving beyond this-world 'death' and of contact between the dead and the living tell us otherwise (Anon 2017a; Carter 2012; Hemingway 2008; Martin 2009; Newcomb and Richardson 2011). Amazing to conventional wisdom, the *evidence* of survival and of continuing interaction is overwhelming, throwing new light on the concept and actuality of consciousness beyond what we think of as everyday 'reality'.

Heaven-sent voices are constantly with us it seems. Often ignored in the academic literature the subject is now receiving attention, more at any rate than in the last century or so (wiser than us, it was taken more seriously by classical and mediaeval writers, even the once despised but actually often insightful Victorian scholars). There are now a multitude of studies in this area (summed up in such works as Schwartz 2012; Worrall 2014). Notably, the best-selling of these are by hard-nosed scientists and neurosurgeons who, late in life, have, almost against their best will, been converted through personal experience or scientific study to confronting the incontrovertible evidence.

We must not, of course, blink the costs in human suffering, veiling it with some anodyne vision of 'all is well' or arguably false messages of reassurance from those who set themselves up, sometimes misguidedly or, worse, from cynical self-interest, as paid mediums and trance instigators (a common practice now as in the past). But set against that we meet the equally human tales of return and immortality in the repeating cycles of dying, death, venture into heaven ad reluctant return,

and messages, signals and appearances to the earthly living whether in dreams or in some other sensible, everyday, form. There are many cases.

It is striking how many accounts there are of visitations by the dying on their way to another world. This is something I have myself experienced, and totally unexpectedly too, not being in any expectation of their imminent deaths. Once it was from my dying mother (a butterfly, so often the symbol of the soul—not a usual butterfly, though both she and I loved them, but a *huge*, a magical one, seen by no one but myself and with no way it could have come into or out of the dwelling); once from my oldest friend, visiting me as she passed with a poem we both loved but that until then I had never been able to recall in full. They came to me, I am certain, to say farewell (but not goodbye for ever) to one they loved on their way to heaven. After many years on earth, a dying person may not wish to relinquish their life on earth without some sign, sometimes some urgent practical message to a loved one, or at least a sign of farewell.

And then there are the returnees from death or, as many of them put it, from heaven. Impossible, many would say. Fantastic. But the subject is one of profound concern to humanity, always has been, always will be. Return from death appears in humanity's greatest myths, illustrated for example in folklore's tale type indexes or Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 1968), and deep, it seems, in the psyche of our humanity, inspired—who knows whence? Remember the Welsh Powys visiting and returning from Anwin, the underworld, in the *Mabinogion*, the evergreen Greek stories of Persephone's return and of Alcestis brought back from Hades by the burlesque hero Heracles, of Odysseus and Orpheus, and of kings like Arthur returning after death to check their earthly kingdoms. We can recall too the iconic Christian tale of resurrection. The return-from-death narrative, it seems, is a seminal myth known throughout the world and forever.

But it is *more* than 'just' a myth if by that term we imply a delusion, a misconception, even a fabrication. There are plentiful first-hand accounts of the experience of dying and returning, reluctantly, to live again on this earth. It seems that there are thousands, indeed millions, of people worldwide with stories to tell, communicating what they had of themselves seen, heard and felt, and thousands of credible death-and-return reports, as apparently there have been since the beginning of time. These returns are well attested from ancient times: from Plato himself, great philosopher and observer of antiquity, to the evidence of a hardnosed and previously strongly skeptic neurological surgeon, Eben Alexander (2012), supported by numerous others (Anon 2017a; Facco and Agrillo 2012; Van Lommel 2011; Worrall 2014 are only a few examples among the many scholarly—scientific not speculative—studies).

The evidence is extensive and compelling in both factual and epistemological terms well supported in the recent surge of interest by philosophers, physicists, information technologists, medics, and social- and neuro-scientists in consciousness studies, robotics and cognitive issues. The experience, it seems, is much more widespread than would appear from the conventional wisdom and it is now at last 'done to talk about it!' So there are now many scientific accounts of the so-called 'near-death experience', even, now, with its own acronym of NDE.

Interpretations incompatible with the ruling physicalist and reductionist stance are conventionally ruled out of account. Indeed even mentioning it is impossible in certain circles so that it is often only at the end of their careers, after retirement, that scientists come out with what they have been doing and complement the scientific accounts by the first-hand human tales of contact with the dead and their experience of, as Annamaria Hemingway (2008) has it, 'the eternal continuum of consciousness'.

3.4. Inspiration, Trance, Music

All those with western schooling will have been brought up on that instance—the dreamed poem, the intruder on Coleridge's betranced remembering, the stirring fragment that remains—dream- and trance-like indeed.

There are so many cases—and not just, as earlier folklorists and anthropologists tended to assume, in 'other cultures', or among the possessed mediums, mystic inspiration and trances of far away

and long ago. The 'extraordinary' is right here among us. We know of countless poems and musical compositions in cultures of all kinds created in some mode of trance by their composers. There is a sense in which creativity, nowadays a topic of such interest, —is often the fruit of another existence than the workaday world of the one we know in our 'normal' and ordinary day to day lives.

We know too of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Mark Twain's speeches, poetry and song coming from some kind of trance or altered consciousness rather than workaday routines. Music too, like the dreams (dreams—we never, it seems, get away from that mode of consciousness) that inspired Brahms and Mozart—but then, how could the origin of such heavenly beauty be purely mundane? Or the baroque violin virtuoso Tartini, so often forgotten. His near unplayable 'Devil's Trills', so the story goes, originated in a pact with the devil who came in a dream to play them to Tartini overnight—and hard enough they were, a movement full of trills and double stoppings that, forgetting the rest, he still remembered when he awoke. Until Yehudi Menuhin, it is said, Tartini alone could play it—with his six fingered devil-endowed left hand. My own novel too, *Black-Inked Pearl*, arrived from somewhere outside me, without, it seemed, conscious thought or planning but, again, in that trancelike liminal state between sleeping and waking. As for the London-Caribbean poet Denise Saul (2017) my poems too arrive from some liminal space beyond me, ready-made in their appropriate genres, rhythms and sonic assonances and needing no deliberate careful emendations.

Music too must be included here, a crucial if puzzling element in the entrancement of artistic creating. Though in the past rather seldom noticed in the context of studies of folklore, science or consciousness, musical experience is now attracting serious interest and research. Complementing this, musicologists, 'ethno'- and other, such as Steven Feld (1990); Ruth Herbert (2017) and, a pioneer, Tia DeNora (2011) draw our attention to the sometimes deliberately induced 'heightened' or 'altered' experiences of musicking. And we too often forget Albert Einstein who, asked about the origin of his theory of relativity—the start of modern science—is said to have replied.

The theory of relativity occurred to me by intuition, and music is the driving force behind that intuition. My parents had me study the violin from the time I was six. My new discovery is the result of musical perception. . . . I often think in music. I live my daydreams in music. . . . Imagination is more important than knowledge (Root-Bernstein and Robert 2010).

There is now work on, or at least scattered references to, for example, the relation of music to dream-revelation, to healing, to psychic energy, the emotions, occult and prophetic thought, our sense of structure and rhythm (for example, amidst a plethora of publications, Aldridge and Fachner 2009; Anon 2009; Becker 2004; Berger 2010; Blacking 1995; Clarke and Clarke 2011; Clayton 2012; Clayton et al. 2003; Clayton and Dueck 2013; De Matos et al. 2008; Ellis 2003; Feld 1990; Finnegan [1989] 2007, 2017; Hunter 2015; the pioneer Merriam 1964; Mould 2003; Sacks 2011; Stewart 1999; Storr 1997). Musicking can indeed be seen as the outcome of that most enduring of the human senses, with us from womb to deathbed—touch-audition. Like dreaming, meditation and the experience of and return from death, music enables the re-creation of mind and supports the enhanced and altered states of consciousness we might term 'entrancement'. Chanting too has long been accepted as carrying deep meaning and altering perception, widely utilized in healing, in meditation, in hypnosis, in shamanic trancing (Clément 2014; Rouget 1985; Roseman 1991). And who, one might ask, can picture any kind of heaven without its trumpets and its choirs of angels? Music, it turns out, is, both obviously and, to many, unexpectedly, crucial in human culture, above all when shared with others. It is something that in some way brings us into first-hand touch with what is, it could be said, the deepest consciousness of all.

In our art and inspiration—the drawing of 'breath', just another name for spirit, life, soul, the 'other', the 'numinous'—is somehow always here with us. It is true that curtains may at many times somehow shut us off from what might be called our liminal selves. But these veils are also more, or less, thin at different points in our lives. In trance, in dream, in music, in traces of our inner, non-fully conscious, selves, they are to an extent thinner or drawn aside.

3.5. 'Consciousness'

So then to consciousness, a much considered term today, especially though not exclusively in neurology and the physical sciences. It is also, it scarcely needs saying, a deeply complex and controversial subject that, like most of us no doubt, I am far from understanding. But it is worthy of note that it—'consciousness'—has become a new object of study, building on but challenging the insights that have formed our western awareness since we were born. The concept has so many roots, not least in classical antiquity and ancient Judaic wisdom and, no doubt, before: the pre-Socratics, among others, had much to say on this not least the fluidity of not stepping the same river twice, a notion that has since (think of relativity and quantum theory) returned as a powerful notion within modern science. And now in the increasing confluence (in some circles) of science and spiritual thinking there is a decisive opening up to new ideas, new ways of appreciating the nature of consciousness. So it is worth looking again at this key area in the light of recent developments in science that, in turn, have much to say to the humanities.

The confidence of mid- and much late-twentieth-century science seemed to suggest all was already known and understood: forever fixed in a material, fixed and conquerable universe. Much *was*—and is—indeed known and the fruits of the scientific endeavors of those years are much with us, and to our benefit. But gradually the once separate tributaries have started to flow together. Think of Freud (Freud and Oppenheim 2011), Jung's seminal concept of the collective unconscious (1959/2017)—unseen, unheard, un-experimentally proven yet entirely credible—together with nineteenth-century influences from pioneers (for the time) like Andrew Lang ([1898] 2012), the Russia theosophical writer Helena Blavatsky ([1910] 2014), and novels, influential in their own way, like Rider Haggard's famously fantastical but in its way convincing *She* (Haggard [1887] 2017), then, more decisively, with the revolution in thought created by Einstein followed by quantum and chaos theory, brain scans, advances in neurology, the new worlds of MRI—comparable to the startling new worlds once revealed with the invention of the telescope and the microscope—pushed on most notably by the theory of relativity and the elision or conflation of the concepts of time and space. The world has changed. Or, to put it better, our understanding of the world has changed—has been revolutionized. The universe is not, as we once assumed, material, ourselves mental and spiritual. As a series of research works have indicated (for example Buhner 2014) consciousness can be conceived as running through all things—animals (little surprise there), plants, the sea, robots, the earth . . .

Allied to this, the 1960's emphasis on psychedelic drugs has been largely superseded by a much wider interest in the full range of what are nowadays called 'altered states of consciousness', by now discussed enough to have its own acronym (ASC). Psychologists investigate and consider the possibility of universal human psychobiological potentials that can be reproduced and studied under laboratory conditions. Such research uses neurophysiology (the study of the nervous system)—including the relationship between drum rhythms and brain-waves—and chemistry, through the study of opiate-like compounds called endorphins. From the other end New Age and neo-shamanist practitioners share a commitment to the idea of states of consciousness that transcend particular cultures. Some authors speak of a general religious state of consciousness or of a trance-state that encompasses both shamanism and possession. Others identify a distinctive shamanic state of trance or ecstasy based on the shaman's experience of soul flight (some speak of a single 'shamanic state of consciousness', but it seems increasingly likely that there are many).

This brings us to telepathy, that difficult term better expressed as 'shared minds' or *koninonia*, communion, a word, fittingly from the Greek, with its appropriately theological as well as philosophical connotations. Here we find a species of somehow 'shared experience irrespective of time and space and of everyday living', a new view of consciousness that has attracted much interest, both popular and academic (and from hard-headed science at that). Answers have turned into questions, visions into journeys of exploration. We no longer know just what consciousness is but *do* know we need to seek to understand it.

Well then, what of telepathy, one aspect after all of consciousness? There is now a considerable scientific literature on the subject, connecting it with the more general studies of consciousness and coming from scientists rather than from humanistic scholars (for example [Anon 2011, 2012, 2017b, 2017c](#); [Blackmore 2008](#); [Brown 1999](#); [Brown and Stenner 2009](#); [Buhner 2014](#); [Dossey 2013](#) (a wonderful work); [Edelman and Tononi 2001](#); [Goswami 2001](#); [Mavromatis 2010](#); [Radin 1997, 2006](#); [Schwartz 2007, 2012](#); [Sheldrake 2000, 2003](#); [Targ 2012](#); [Tart 2009](#); [Wagner 2012](#); [Wilbur 2000](#); [Williams 2012](#); [Zangrilli 2012](#))—Many people of course do not believe this is possible, or at any rate, when asked in public affirm this position. Nor in some moods do I think it could happen on this earth ('heaven' or 'beyond time and space' is a different matter). I too am a scientist of sorts and everything I have been taught since a child seems to point the other way.

And yet—our own experience attests it. Without looking or feeling we know when someone is reading over our shoulder in the underground—what is that but, somehow, non-sensory perception? It doesn't surprise us or even, unless we start thinking about it, seem strange—and yet, how can it be possible in our normal scheme of things? Dogs and other pets often—it is well attested—know when their owners are coming home or are in danger. Hunting herds whether of animals or scattered desert bands keep in touch, somehow non-verbally—and effectively. If we accept it for animals must we rule out that potential skill for humans, that supposedly superior species, and say it must be 'impossible'? And yet we believe in extra sensory communication between twins (analyzed in [Playfair 2012](#); [Wagner 2012](#)), the sudden strike of love between two previously unknown individuals, and the power of someone, unseen, staring at us ([Sheldrake \(2003\)](#) has an analysis and many fascinating examples). It seems indeed incontrovertible that alternative consciousness really does happen, of the kind we access in dreams, our real, if puzzling, continuing contact with the dead with the living through some 'sixth' sense or that creative space in which we dwell when we experience the vibes of some sacred place the experience of psychic awareness, inspiration or perhaps beyond all, music. This or these, experiences are all too common in 'everyday' life yet at the same time all too seldom explicitly recognized in scholarly humanistic circles. And yet all the time they are there, brushed aside, as folklorists well know from their other studies, as too familiar to take seriously.

And do we not nowadays—even psychotherapists and counsellors seem to admit the possibility, no the *reality* of this—accept some continuing deep connection between living and dead (referenced earlier): different, but continuing, reinforced in many people's experience, if only at times of dire crisis, by a recourse to prayer or 'thinking of you'? Have we not all known of at least one such enduring, mutually loving, relationship: between mother and dead child, born or unborn; husband and wife; passionate lovers? Why do we exclude it between the living?

What is involved, it seems (if, that is we can for the moment suspend disbelief), is that two intimately linked souls do not so much 'send and receive' specific 'messages' at a distance (*tele*—) as find themselves somehow *merged*, together in some extraordinary, liminal, domain, the thoughts and feelings of the one interpenetrating the other: less email message than a drop-box on the cloud. And this indeed is exactly consonant not only with the older notions like Jung's collective unconscious but with the up-to-the minute concepts and, yes, findings in the new science: the idea of not just *shared* individual minds but, in a way, a *single* mind that is at once multiple and united (expounded with particular force in ([Dossey 2013](#)) but reinforced too by many other scientific works, such as those referenced earlier).

If this can happen, unintended and unplanned, to ordinary people, even on occasion to myself, a willing and arguably successful product of western science, could it not equally apply to many others, maybe potentially all humankind? And from what I have learned and what we can read, does it not seem that certain activities can enhance our receptivity? I think of already practised arts like meditation; 'mindfulness'; 'alternative' (as they are called) modes of healing and insight and, perhaps, divination in the present of the past and future; respect for our dreams; engagement in spirituality or religion, not least eastern religions and philosophies aided, for some, by the power of

prayer; communion with nature' and perhaps most of all an acceptance of what we experience and—is this my Quaker background showing?—the exercise of silence and waiting.

Folklorists and anthropologists have indeed often studied beliefs *about* such things, often enough under the head of such terms as 'myths' or (more dismissive) 'superstitions' or 'oddities', principally among the 'them' of villagers or minorities or the colonized rather than 'ourselves'. But until quite recently they have rather seldom paid serious attention to the *practices*—what people actually *do*—and, equally important, how their beliefs interact, in a serious and non-reductionist way, with not only their culture and behavior but with what could be called, for them no less than for ourselves, that difficult and complex yet in the end, for most people, necessary, concept: 'reality'.

In conclusion—we should not be afraid to look to ourselves ('dig where we stand'), to our own experiences, to the extraordinary, yes and ordinary, experiences of ourselves and others throughout the world and throughout the ages. We need to feed into the scientific work in heightened consciousness and the like the insights, rooted in both transcultural reflection and detailed ethnographies, that, spanning the humanities and the social sciences that folklore and anthropology can contribute. This is a crucial area for humankind, and one in which indeed folklore, together with anthropology, is starting to contribute to the development of our understanding, making explicit things which perhaps in a way we already knew but had failed to notice. It is time to reveal and above all to *consolidate* these hidden ways of the ordinary more loudly, more clearly and in a more integrated way.

Only thus can we do justice to the secrets of the universe, to the ordinary-extraordinary human ways that underpin and create our human culture. If we will only allow and encourage it, this area of study, puzzling, controversial and fascinating as it is, can only contribute more as the years roll by. The river's tributaries continue to flow and, if we look, reveal their hidden, too often resisted ways in the cause of the humanities.

So let me end, as I started, with a good and well-known saying: 'Only connect'.

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¹ My selection of references from a large and daily increasing field is naturally limited but it may at least provide a start while at the same time demonstrating—as once, I believe, I did for oral literature—that this is no offhand, unresearched, or unresearchable field but one starting to attract as solid—if often ignored in 'mainstream' humanities scholarship—and well evidenced a literature as the more conventionally established fields of studies. Though relatively extensive this is of course only an essentially personal and somewhat serendipitous list. My apologies to those that, if space and time had allowed, I would like to have included. I would also be truly grateful for further comment and additions: this would be a valuable input to both folklore in articular and the humanities in general.

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