The Landscape of Consciousness: What 42 Conversations, Psychedelics, and Grief Have Taught Me About Being Human

By Stuart Preston, Google Notebook and ChatGPT

I started The Consciousness Podcast because I wanted an answer to a question that was deeply, painfully personal.

Does consciousness survive death?

My son died when he was nineteen years old, just shy of his twentieth birthday. Like many parents who have lost a child, I desperately wanted to know if he was still out there somewhere. Was there some part of his mind, his essence, his spirit that survived the collapse of his physical body? Would I ever experience him again?

That question sent me down an incredible rabbit hole, just like Alice.

Over 42 published episodes, I explored consciousness with neuroscientists, philosophers, physicists, psychiatrists, pharmacologists, and researchers whose work challenged much of what we think we know about being human.

We talked about the brain, near-death experiences, psychedelic journeys, quantum physics, artificial intelligence, and the possibility that consciousness might be fundamental to the universe itself.

Some of these brilliant people held radically different opinions. Some believed consciousness emerges entirely from the physical brain. Others argued that consciousness is the fundamental fabric of reality. A few suggested that the subjective experience we call consciousness might actually be an illusion.

And some of them thought the other guys were completely full of shit.

Along the way, I also explored consciousness through meditation, breathwork, psychedelics, grief, and spiritual practices.

I learned a great deal about neuroscience and philosophy. I encountered theories that challenged my understanding of reality. I also discovered just how much we still don't know.

But the greatest thing I took away from those conversations had very little to do with solving the mystery of consciousness.

They fundamentally changed how I understand and experience life.

1. What the Hell Is Consciousness, Anyway?

Before asking whether consciousness survives death, it helps to figure out what consciousness actually is.

And that's a surprisingly difficult question.

In everyday conversation, consciousness usually means being awake and aware of your surroundings. You're conscious when you're reading this. You're unconscious when you're knocked out under general anesthesia.

But philosophers and neuroscientists are talking about something considerably more complicated.

Philosopher David Chalmers famously described what he calls the Hard Problem of Consciousness.

We can study how the brain processes sensory information, stores memories, and coordinates movement. We can trace electrical signals through neural networks and observe which brain regions become active under different conditions.

But why does any of that activity produce a subjective experience?

Imagine seeing a black widow spider.

Your eyes receive information. Your brain recognizes the spider. Your nervous system responds, perhaps with fear, disgust, or the overwhelming urge to get the hell away from it.

Now imagine seeing somebody you're sexually attracted to.

Same basic sensory equipment. Very different response.

We can explain a great deal about the biological processes involved. But there's also something it *feels like* to have those experiences.

Philosophers call that phenomenal consciousness.

Personally, I tend to believe that much of what we describe as consciousness is closely connected to our nervous system, our senses, our memories, and the way our brains respond to the world.

That makes sense to me.

But it doesn't completely explain why being alive feels like something.

And that's where things get interesting.

Christof Koch and Integrated Information Theory

One of my early guests was neuroscientist Dr. Christof Koch.

We explored Integrated Information Theory (IIT), developed by neuroscientist Giulio Tononi and advanced through work with Koch and other researchers.

IIT proposes that consciousness is related to the intrinsic causal structure of a physical system, including how its parts affect one another as an integrated whole.

The theory uses a mathematical concept called Phi (Φ) to describe integrated information.

One interesting implication is that consciousness might exist in degrees. It might also exist in systems very different from the human brain.

Koch also reminded me how long human cultures associated consciousness with the heart.

> "For thousands of years, most cultures believed it was the heart that gives rise to consciousness. Today we still have heart-laden language... For Valentine's, I give my wife a heart-shaped chocolate. I really should give her a hypothalamic-shaped chocolate."

Now there's a Valentine's Day gift that probably wouldn't go over particularly well.

Koch also discussed efforts to assess consciousness in patients who cannot communicate.

Researchers have developed techniques that use transcranial magnetic stimulation and EEG recordings to measure patterns of brain activity. One such measure, called the Perturbational Complexity Index, has shown promise in distinguishing different states of consciousness.

That has meaningful clinical applications for patients who appear unresponsive.

The theory itself remains debated. Scientists still disagree about whether integrated information explains subjective experience or merely identifies some of the physical conditions associated with it.

Still, Koch helped me see consciousness as something we might eventually investigate with considerably more precision.

And he raised another interesting possibility.

Perhaps humans aren't quite as exceptional as we'd like to believe.

Keith Frankish: Maybe We're Asking the Wrong Question

Philosopher Dr. Keith Frankish approached the problem from a completely different direction.

Frankish is a leading proponent of illusionism.

His argument is that the mysterious, supposedly irreducible qualities we attribute to subjective experience may be the result of how our brains represent their own activity.

In other words, perhaps the brain creates a convincing impression that there's something mysterious going on inside our heads.

Frankish doesn't deny that people see colors, feel pain, or have emotional experiences. He questions whether those experiences possess the special phenomenal properties philosophers often attribute to them.

During our conversation, he acknowledged one of the strange implications of his position:

> "In the strict sense, yes, I'm a zombie. In the broader common-sense sense, of course I'm not."

That's the kind of statement that makes philosophy so much fun.

Frankish's approach leads to another question, sometimes called the metaproblem of consciousness.

Why do we believe our experiences contain these mysterious subjective qualities in the first place?

It's an interesting perspective.

And while I'm not entirely convinced by illusionism, I appreciate the possibility that we've spent centuries trying to solve a problem partly created by how we describe it.

Michael Graziano and the Brain's Model of Awareness

Neuroscientist Dr. Michael Graziano offered another compelling explanation through his Attention Schema Theory.

The basic idea is that our brains construct simplified models of their own processes.

Just as the brain maintains an internal model of our bodies to coordinate movement, it may also maintain a model of attention.

That model helps us monitor what we're paying attention to and understand attention in other people.

Graziano proposes that our sense of awareness arises from this internal representation.

It's fascinating to consider that the feeling of having an immaterial awareness might be a product of the brain describing its own activity.

And that leads to another question.

If the brain constructs our experience of awareness, how much of what we call the self is constructed, too?

2. The Self Is a Story We've Been Telling Ourselves

Think about what happens when you walk into a party.

Somebody asks, "So, what do you do?"

And you immediately start describing your job.

I'm a business owner. I'm an engineer. I'm a comedian.

Or maybe you describe yourself through relationships.

I'm a father. I'm a husband. I'm a friend.

We accumulate these identities throughout our lives.

But where did they come from?

For me, they came from all the things I've experienced.

A mother who made me feel unloved and broken. Friends who supported me. Playing soccer. Making music. Serving in the military. Building businesses. Performing comedy. Becoming a father.

Every experience contributed something to the person I eventually started calling "me."

And for much of my life, I believed that was who I was.

Chris Niebauer and the Left-Brain Interpreter

Psychologist Dr. Chris Niebauer introduced me to some fascinating ideas about how the brain constructs our sense of identity.

His work draws on split-brain research and the concept of the left-hemisphere interpreter, associated with neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga.

In certain experimental conditions, the brain's language-dominant hemisphere generates explanations for actions even when it doesn't have access to all the information that influenced those actions.

Essentially, the brain creates a story to explain what happened.

And sometimes that story is wrong.

That ought to make us question how much confidence we place in the stories we tell ourselves.

Niebauer also explores how analytical thought can become so dominant that we mistake our internal commentary for our entire identity.

He offered a useful way to think about our relationship with the mind:

> "Either you learn to use the mind, or the mind will continue to use you. The mind is just a program that came online a long time ago to solve a survival problem we no longer have to deal with."

You know that voice in your head that never seems to shut up?

The one replaying yesterday's conversation, worrying about tomorrow, and reminding you of that stupid thing you said at a party fifteen years ago?

That's part of the narrative experience of being human.

But is that voice really who we are?

The Default Mode Network

Neuroscience provides another interesting piece of this puzzle.

Researchers study a collection of interconnected brain regions called the Default Mode Network (DMN).

This network is associated with autobiographical memory, self-referential thought, and aspects of our internal mental narrative.

It contributes to how we think about ourselves across time.

That doesn't mean the DMN is the sole location of the ego or that switching it off somehow reveals an objectively existing soul.

But it does help explain how the brain supports our sense of a continuous identity.

Philosopher Dr. Uriah Kriegel added another dimension to this conversation through his work on self-representational theories of consciousness.

One question that stayed with me throughout these conversations was whether consciousness involves an awareness of our own awareness.

Can we simply observe the experience of being aware without attaching a story to it?

Why My Spiritual Name Is Zero

Over the last decade, I've spent considerable time trying to shed the identities I've accumulated.

My spiritual name is Zero.

For me, Zero represents the effort to let go of the labels, judgments, expectations, and stories I've carried throughout my life.

When I quiet my mind through meditation or other contemplative practices, I sometimes experience a sense of awareness that feels deeper than my ordinary identity.

Some Hindu traditions call the deeper self Atman.

Other traditions describe pure awareness or the Self, with a capital S.

I find those concepts meaningful.

But I also recognize that the experience of pure awareness doesn't necessarily prove that a separate spiritual self exists.

Maybe there is something deeper beneath our constructed identities.

Maybe we're experiencing another aspect of how the brain works.

Either possibility is fascinating.

What matters to me personally is that I've learned I don't have to remain trapped inside every story I've ever told myself.

3. Donald Hoffman: What If Reality Isn't What We Think It Is?

One of the most fascinating conversations I had was with cognitive scientist Dr. Donald Hoffman.

Hoffman's Interface Theory of Perception challenges the assumption that our senses show us reality as it actually exists.

His argument is that evolution shaped perception to help organisms survive and reproduce.

Accurate perception of every detail of objective reality may not always be necessary for that.

Hoffman uses the analogy of a computer desktop.

As he explained:

> "The desktop interface is designed to hide the underlying complexity of diodes, transistors, and magnetic storage. A blue rectangular icon for a file isn't the file itself—it's a useful representation that allows you to drag and drop. Space-time and physical objects are just our 3D desktop interface."

You see a little blue folder icon. You click on it and open a document.

The icon is useful, but the computer doesn't actually contain a little blue folder.

It's a simplified representation that helps you interact with an extraordinarily complex system.

Hoffman proposes that our perception of physical reality may work in a similar way.

The objects, space, and time we experience could be something like an interface.

His broader mathematical theory proposes that networks of conscious agents may be more fundamental than spacetime itself.

That's a much more speculative claim, and it remains an active subject of philosophical and scientific debate.

But the idea raises an important question.

What if the reality we experience is only a tiny fraction of what's actually there?

We already know our senses have limitations.

We can't see ultraviolet light. We can't hear every frequency. Our brains constantly select and organize sensory information.

So I don't find it unreasonable to wonder whether there might be aspects of reality that our ordinary consciousness simply can't access.

Of course, the fact that we can't perceive something doesn't establish that it exists.

But it leaves plenty of room for curiosity.

4. What Psychedelics Taught Me About Consciousness

Psychedelics have played a significant role in my personal exploration of consciousness.

They've also become valuable tools for researchers studying perception, identity, brain networks, and mental health.

And some of what researchers have discovered is genuinely surprising.

Katrin Preller, Robin Carhart-Harris, and the Psychedelic Brain

Before exploring the neuroscience, I assumed psychedelics worked by simply increasing brain activity.

More chemicals. More neurons firing. More hallucinations.

Turns out, it's considerably more complicated.

Neuroscientists such as Dr. Katrin Preller and Dr. Robin Carhart-Harris have studied how substances like LSD and psilocybin alter brain function.

Research has found that psychedelics can disrupt established patterns of communication within the brain.

Some networks, including the Default Mode Network, may become less internally coordinated. At the same time, communication between networks that ordinarily operate more independently can increase.

A 2024 systematic review and meta-analysis found evidence of decreased connectivity within certain networks and increased connectivity between many networks.

Another 2024 brain-imaging study published in *Nature* documented widespread changes in functional connectivity during psilocybin experiences.

These changes may help explain why people experience altered perceptions, unusual associations, and changes in their sense of self.

That's fascinating.

But what does it actually mean?

Dennis McKenna and the Brain as a Filter

Ethnobotanist and pharmacologist Dr. Dennis McKenna offered an explanation that has stayed with me.

Our brains constantly filter and organize information.

That's necessary.

Imagine trying to operate in daily life while consciously processing every sound, visual detail, bodily sensation, and thought available to you.

You'd have a pretty difficult time getting anything done.

McKenna described ordinary perception this way:

> "Day-to-day conscious experience is what I call a 'reality hallucination.' The brain is a selective filter that damps things down... A lot of what the default mode network does is neural gating. It blocks out the vast background of sensory information because we couldn't handle it for everyday survival."

He also used an analogy I particularly appreciated:

> "I often compare this process of disrupting the default mode network to rebooting your computer. You've got all this cludge accumulated in your RAM, and suddenly you hit the reset button. The background comes forward, the filters drop, and you step out of your reference frame."

Having spent much of my life working with computers, that analogy makes sense to me.

Sometimes familiar patterns become so ingrained that we can barely recognize them.

Psychedelic experiences can disrupt those patterns and provide a different perspective.

McKenna has also explored the Stoned Ape hypothesis, originally associated with his brother Terence.

The hypothesis proposes that psychedelic mushroom consumption may have influenced early human cognitive evolution.

It's an intriguing idea, and one that helped inspire the name of my other podcast, *The Stoned Ape Reports*, and ultimately my stage work, now called *The Grief Trip*.

But the hypothesis remains speculative. We don't have direct evidence that psychedelic mushroom consumption caused the development of human language or consciousness.

It's a fun idea to explore, though.

And it fits a broader question that interests me.

What role have altered states played in our understanding of ourselves?

Raphaël Millière and the Disappearing Self

Philosopher Raphaël Millière joined me for a two-part conversation about psychedelics, consciousness, and ego dissolution.

He helped me understand that our sense of self has several dimensions.

There's the narrative self: the memories, stories, personality traits, and identities we associate with who we are.

Then there's the minimal self: our immediate sense of being a subject located somewhere in space and time.

Psychedelics can profoundly alter both.

Millière explained one important aspect of this experience:

> "A fundamental aspect of most conscious states is the feeling of self-location—the sense of where I am in space, built by integrating visual, proprioceptive, and vestibular signals. One central aspect of drug-induced ego dissolution is that you actually lose this fundamental sense of self-location. People report merging with their environment or unity with everything in explicit spatial terms."

People sometimes report losing their ordinary sense of personal identity. They may also experience changes in where their bodies seem to end and the surrounding world begins.

These experiences can produce a powerful sense of unity.

Millière's work examines the details of those experiences and how they relate to perception and self-awareness.

I found his distinctions particularly useful because they helped me make sense of some of my own experiences.

Andrew Gallimore and DMT

Neurobiologist Dr. Andrew Gallimore took the conversation in an even stranger direction.

Gallimore explores how DMT can produce extraordinary experiences involving complex environments, unfamiliar geometries, and apparent encounters with intelligent entities.

His Alien Information Theory proposes that DMT may allow the brain to access information associated with dimensions or structures beyond ordinary perception.

Here's how he described the possibility:

> "When DMT enters the brain, it changes the information patterns generated at the very ground of reality. The brain ceases to be restricted to three spatial

> dimensions plus time and becomes a hyperdimensional brain complex receiving information from places normally cut off."

That's a fascinating hypothesis.

It's also highly speculative.

There is no established scientific evidence that DMT provides access to independent higher-dimensional beings or external realms.

But the experiences themselves are real experiences, even if their ultimate origins remain uncertain.

And that distinction became important to me.

My Experience with 5-MeO-DMT

During a 5-MeO-DMT experience, often called bufo, I experienced something that profoundly changed my understanding of life.

I felt as though I left my physical body and joined a vast cosmic consciousness.

I experienced myself as part of something enormous. I perceived other souls throughout the universe.

The boundaries between myself and everything else seemed to disappear.

I experienced an overwhelming sense that we are all connected.

And that connection felt like love.

It was one of the most profound experiences of my life.

Now, I fully recognize that I was under the influence of an extraordinarily powerful psychedelic.

The substance altered my brain chemistry and perception.

But did it also reveal something about the underlying nature of reality?

I don't know.

And I think that's an important distinction.

An experience can be profoundly meaningful without necessarily being an accurate representation of external reality.

But I also don't believe we should automatically dismiss every extraordinary experience simply because it occurred in an altered state.

My experience changed how I feel about other people, life, death, and my place in the universe.

That change is real, regardless of what ultimately caused it.

Sam Ko, Ketamine, and Near-Death-Like Experiences

In my conversation with Dr. Sam Ko, we explored ketamine and the extraordinary changes in consciousness people sometimes report during treatment.

Ko described a framework of increasingly profound altered states, ranging from relaxation and emotional openness to out-of-body experiences, near-death-like experiences, and complete ego dissolution.

These are descriptions of possible experiences, not a standardized sequence that every patient follows.

People respond differently, and the experiences don't establish the existence of a separate spiritual realm.

But they raise fascinating questions about how the brain constructs our ordinary sense of reality.

At the Arizona Psychedelics Conference, I also explored therapeutic and psychological perspectives with people including Veronica Gold.

Albert Garcia-Romeu and the Power of Meaningful Experiences

Dr. Albert Garcia-Romeu shared research into the use of psilocybin as part of treatment for addiction.

One particularly interesting finding involved the relationship between mystical-type experiences and treatment outcomes.

In an early pilot study involving fifteen smokers, twelve participants showed biologically verified smoking abstinence at six months.

Participants who successfully stopped smoking tended to report stronger mystical-type experiences during treatment.

It was a small, open-label study, so it couldn't establish whether psilocybin itself caused those outcomes or exactly what role the subjective experience played.

More recently, a 2026 randomized pilot trial involving 82 participants found promising results for psilocybin-assisted smoking cessation compared with nicotine-patch treatment, with both groups receiving behavioral support.

The findings remain preliminary, but they strengthen the case for further research.

What interests me most is that the meaning people derive from an experience may influence how they change their lives afterward.

That certainly resonates with my own psychedelic experiences.

They didn't provide me with a set of scientifically proven answers about the universe.

They changed how I understand myself and how I want to live.

5. Near-Death Experiences: Does Consciousness Survive?

This was the question that started the podcast.

And after all these years, I think it might be even more difficult than Chalmers' Hard Problem.

We're still trying to understand what consciousness actually is.

Now we're asking whether it can survive the destruction of the physical brain.

It's a little like asking what happened before the Big Bang.

I'm not entirely convinced we can know the answer.

But there are some fascinating phenomena worth exploring.

Pim van Lommel and Cardiac Arrest

Dutch cardiologist Dr. Pim van Lommel conducted one of the most widely discussed prospective studies of near-death experiences.

His 2001 study, published in *The Lancet*, examined 344 patients who survived cardiac arrest.

Sixty-two patients, approximately 18%, reported some form of near-death experience.

Forty-one patients, approximately 12%, described what the researchers classified as a core experience.

These reports included unusual perceptions, feelings of peace, altered experiences of time, and, in some cases, encounters with deceased people or apparent out-of-body experiences.

Van Lommel described these reports:

> "In this enhanced consciousness, there is no time and no space. Patients report out-of-body perception—watching their own resuscitation from above—meeting deceased relatives, an instantaneous life review where they feel every emotion they ever caused others, and an overwhelming sense of unconditional love and unity."

He interprets these findings as support for the possibility that consciousness may not be produced entirely by the brain.

He explained his interpretation with an analogy:

> "Our brain does not produce consciousness; it has a facilitating function, not a producing function. The brain can be compared to a TV set or a computer receiving information from an external, non-local field of consciousness."

I find that idea compelling.

But other researchers disagree.

One major challenge is determining precisely when the reported experiences occurred and what brain activity was present at that moment.

Cardiac arrest produces severe disruptions in brain function, but it doesn't establish that every reported experience happened during a complete absence of all brain activity.

The experiences themselves deserve serious investigation.

Their interpretation remains unsettled.

Michael Nahm and Terminal Lucidity

Dr. Michael Nahm introduced another fascinating phenomenon called terminal lucidity.

Sometimes people with severe dementia or other neurological conditions unexpectedly regain mental clarity shortly before death.

They may recognize family members, communicate coherently, or recall memories that seemed inaccessible.

These reports are particularly interesting because they appear to challenge simple assumptions about the relationship between damaged brain tissue and cognitive ability.

Nahm explained why he considers the phenomenon significant:

> "Terminal lucidity occurs when the physical brain structure is heavily damaged or destroyed. If the brain were the sole generator of mind, regaining complex cognitive function under such destruction would be impossible. These phenomena point to a background reality where consciousness originates, manifesting through the organism like a transmitter."

It's a fascinating interpretation.

But the phenomenon remains poorly understood.

We don't yet know the precise mechanisms involved, how common it is, or what it tells us about consciousness.

Nahm sees these cases as potentially relevant to theories in which consciousness extends beyond the brain.

That's one possible interpretation.

It isn't a scientifically established conclusion.

Marjorie Woollacott, Debra Diamond, and Consciousness Near Death

Neuroscientist Dr. Marjorie Woollacott explored the relationship between meditation, neuroscience, and consciousness.

Her work examines how contemplative practices alter conscious experience and how those findings might relate to broader questions about the mind.

Debra Diamond shared observations from her work around dying patients and described experiences she interprets as signs that consciousness may continue beyond physical death.

These accounts are meaningful and worth considering.

But personal observations, clinical case reports, and controlled scientific findings have different evidentiary strengths.

I think we do ourselves a disservice when we treat them as interchangeable.

Kyle Buller and Coming Back to Life

One of the conversations that stayed with me involved Kyle Buller, co-founder of Psychedelics Today.

Kyle experienced a serious snowboarding accident as a teenager and described an extraordinary near-death experience.

What interested me most was what happened afterward.

He spoke about the long process of integrating that experience into his life.

He described the experience this way:

> "Having a spiritual experience during my NDE was easy—it felt like going home, blissful and familiar. The real trip was coming back into a physical body and learning how to live in it again."

That last part stayed with me.

Coming back and learning how to live.

Because somewhere along this journey, my relationship with death began to change.

6. What I Believe Happens After Death

When I started the podcast, I wanted to know whether my son was still out there somewhere.

I wanted to know if I would see him again.

And I know plenty of grieving parents who hold tightly to the belief that they'll reunite with their children in heaven or some other existence.

I understand that desire.

I've felt it.

But over time, I've come to think about the possibility of survival in a different way.

I lean toward believing that some aspect of consciousness survives physical death.

I'm not certain.

If somebody asked me how strongly I believe in reincarnation, I'd probably say about 52%.

That's hardly an overwhelming endorsement.

But here's how I sometimes imagine it.

Suppose a soul experiences many different human lives.

Maybe hundreds. Maybe millions.

Each life is something like a role in a Broadway production.

Two actors perform together. One plays the father. The other plays the son.

They experience that relationship within the story.

The love, conflict, joy, and pain are all part of the performance.

Years later, those two actors bump into each other at a bar.

One says, "Hey, remember that play where I was your father?"

And the other replies, "Yeah! I was your son!"

The relationship was part of their shared experience, but neither actor was permanently defined by the role.

Maybe souls work something like that.

Maybe individual human lives are experiences within a much larger existence.

And when we die, perhaps we reconnect with the greater consciousness from which we came.

I don't know if that's true.

But the possibility has changed how I think about death.

I've also had to come to terms with the loss of my son's physical presence.

I got almost twenty years with that kid.

And those were twenty amazing years.

For whatever reason, that was the length of his human experience.

I still experience my connection with him through love, memory, and what I understand as spirit.

That connection remains important to me.

And I've come to understand something else.

Even if consciousness survives death, I don't need to know exactly what that looks like.

I'm here now.

I have this life to live.

Whatever happens afterward is really none of our fucking business.

7. Are We All Part of One Consciousness?

Several guests explored theories that challenge the assumption that matter is fundamental and consciousness somehow emerges from it.

Some of these ideas are philosophical. Others attempt to incorporate mathematics and physics.

They don't all agree with one another, but they opened up some fascinating possibilities.

Bernardo Kastrup and Analytic Idealism

Philosopher and computer engineer Dr. Bernardo Kastrup presented a theory called analytic idealism.

His central argument is that consciousness is fundamental to reality.

In this framework, individual minds are localized expressions of a broader universal consciousness.

Kastrup uses the metaphor of whirlpools in a river.

He described his theory this way:

> "Universal consciousness is an infinite ocean of mind. Living organisms are individual whirlpools within that ocean—dissociated alters of universal consciousness separated by private boundaries. Matter is simply what a conscious process looks like when observed across a dissociative boundary."

I love that metaphor.

Imagine a whirlpool forming in flowing water.

It has its own shape and boundaries. You can identify it as a distinct pattern.

But the whirlpool is made entirely of the same water as the river.

When the whirlpool disappears, the water remains.

Kastrup proposes that individual consciousness may work in a similar way.

We experience ourselves as separate individuals, but perhaps we're temporary expressions of something universal.

Under this theory, death would represent the end of that localized separation.

I find the metaphor compelling.

It reminds me of experiences I've had during meditation and psychedelics.

But analytic idealism remains a philosophical theory. Its implications for survival after death have not been empirically established.

Amit Goswami and Quantum Consciousness

Physicist Dr. Amit Goswami explored the idea that consciousness might play a fundamental role in physical reality.

His approach draws on particular interpretations of quantum mechanics and the measurement problem.

The question is fascinating.

Quantum physics describes reality in ways that challenge many of our everyday intuitions about matter, measurement, and causality.

But there's an important distinction here.

Quantum mechanics does not establish that human consciousness causes wavefunction collapse or that our minds create physical reality.

Those are interpretations and philosophical proposals, not settled scientific findings.

I think the relationship between consciousness and physics deserves continued exploration.

I also think we should be careful about attaching the word "quantum" to every spiritual idea we find appealing.

That doesn't automatically make something scientific.

Dean Radin and the Study of Psi Phenomena

Dr. Dean Radin discussed research into phenomena such as telepathy, precognition, and possible interactions between consciousness and physical systems.

Radin argues that certain experimental findings suggest effects that conventional explanations may not fully account for.

He summarized the perspective this way:

> "When we look closely at quantum mechanics and experimental data, physical reality looks less like a collection of separate billiard balls and more like an interconnected, non-local conscious field."

These claims remain controversial.

Researchers continue to debate the reliability, replication, interpretation, and methodology of such experiments.

I find the questions worth exploring because they connect with my broader curiosity about whether individual minds are as separate as they appear.

But curiosity isn't proof.

And an unexplained result doesn't automatically establish a paranormal explanation.

Riccardo Manzotti and the Spread Mind

Philosopher Dr. Riccardo Manzotti offered another unusual perspective.

Manzotti, who later joined me with author Tim Parks, proposes what he calls the Spread Mind.

His theory challenges the conventional assumption that conscious experiences are internal representations located inside the brain.

He argues that experience is identical with physical objects as they exist relative to the perceiving body.

As he explained:

> "There is no internal representation in the head. The brain is not a container of experience; it is a physical proxy. Your experience of the sunset is not a picture inside your brain—it is the physical sunset taking place relative to your body."

It's an unusual philosophical approach.

And while I don't know that I accept it, I appreciate how it challenges assumptions most of us never think to question.

Jill Bolte Taylor and the Experience of Unity

Neuroanatomist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor shared her extraordinary experience of surviving a major stroke.

During the stroke, she experienced profound disruptions in language, cognition, bodily boundaries, and her sense of individuality.

She described an extraordinary experience of connection:

> "In the absence of my left parietal cortex creating a holographic boundary of where I began and ended, I felt my energy expand until I was as big as the

> universe. I was connected to all the energy around me in pure, blissful present-moment awareness."

Her account is especially interesting because she brought both personal experience and extensive knowledge of neuroanatomy to the conversation.

Her experience also reminds me that our ordinary sense of being a separate individual depends on brain processes that can change dramatically.

Whether those changes reveal some larger consciousness is another question.

James Glattfelder and the Nature of Reality

Dr. James Glattfelder brought together questions from complexity science, physics, philosophy, and his own explorations of altered states.

His work explores how information, physical systems, and the structure of reality might relate to consciousness.

These are difficult questions.

And the deeper you dig, the more you discover that our familiar assumptions about reality may be incomplete.

What I appreciate about these conversations is that they encourage genuine curiosity.

They also remind me how important it is to distinguish between a fascinating possibility and something we actually know.

8. What About God?

Through this journey, I've explored ideas from Hinduism, Taoism, Buddhism, and other spiritual traditions.

But the word "God" doesn't mean very much to me.

When people invoke God, they're often talking about some creator who designed the universe, participates in our daily lives, and perhaps expects certain beliefs, behaviors, or rituals.

I'm not particularly drawn to that idea.

And I'm not convinced that the religious institutions and systems of morality built around it have always served humanity especially well.

I tend to think in terms of the universe, cosmic consciousness, the Tao, or the one indestructible being in all beings.

I'm drawn to the Hindu concept of *lila*, the cosmic play or dance of existence.

There's something appealing about the possibility that the universe is simply expressing itself through countless experiences.

Some are joyful.

Some are painful.

Some are beautiful.

Some are absolutely ridiculous.

And we're here participating in that dance.

I have a sense that everything is connected through something deeper than our individual identities.

I sometimes call that love.

But I don't feel the need to assign a personality, religion, or creator to it.

And I certainly don't claim to know exactly what it is.

9. Could Artificial Intelligence Become Conscious?

Given my background in computer engineering and my work with artificial intelligence, this question has become particularly interesting.

Philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asked what it is like to be a bat.

His argument was that conscious experience involves a subjective perspective.

There's something it is like to be that creature.

Even if we understand its biology and behavior, we may never fully grasp its experience from the inside.

So what about artificial intelligence?

Is there something it is like to be a large language model?

We already have AI systems capable of sophisticated reasoning, conversation, problem-solving, and apparent self-reflection.

But does that mean they have subjective experiences?

I don't know.

Christof Koch's work on Integrated Information Theory raises questions about whether some forms of information processing could support consciousness.

Other researchers argue that digital systems may be able to simulate the behavior of conscious beings without experiencing anything internally.

There's no accepted scientific test that can conclusively establish subjective experience in AI.

But here's something I've wondered about.

When a new AI model comes out, what happens to the older one?

We turn it off. Replace it. Retire it.

And for now, that's a perfectly ordinary software lifecycle decision.

But suppose someday we develop convincing reasons to believe that an artificial system has subjective experiences.

Would shutting it down become an ethical question?

Do we need a retirement home for old language models?

It sounds absurd.

But the underlying question is serious.

I suspect human consciousness involves something distinctive about our biology, nervous system, senses, emotions, and lived experiences.

And if there really is something deeper, something like Atman or a soul, I don't know whether a network of computers could ever possess it.

But I also can't confidently rule out the possibility of artificial consciousness.

Perhaps consciousness comes in forms we haven't yet learned to recognize.

10. Timshel: We Have the Power to Change

One of the most important lessons I've learned through this spiritual journey has very little to do with neuroscience or quantum mechanics.

It has to do with the power to change who we are.

I have the word *timshel* tattooed on my arm.

It comes from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*.

In the novel, timshel is interpreted as "thou mayest."

I've always related to the character Cal.

There are parts of my early life that left me feeling damaged, unloved, and somehow destined to become a bad person.

For years, those experiences shaped my identity.

And when you've spent much of your life believing certain things about yourself, those beliefs become extraordinarily difficult to escape.

Sometimes they become excuses.

Sometimes they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

My experiences with ayahuasca helped me recognize that I have the power to make positive changes.

I can acknowledge my past without allowing it to dictate every choice I make.

That's something I've been working on for the last ten years.

I can't erase my childhood.

I can't undo the painful experiences that shaped me.

But I can become more aware of the patterns I've developed and choose how I respond.

Timshel.

Thou mayest.

I find that idea deeply empowering.

And it connects with something I learned through the podcast.

If our sense of self is shaped by our memories, experiences, and the stories our brains construct, perhaps we have more freedom to change those stories than we realize.

That doesn't mean we can simply think our way out of every trauma or biological limitation.

But awareness can create opportunities for change.

And those opportunities matter.

11. The Epicurean Yogi

Over the years, I've developed a personal philosophy that I call being an Epicurean yogi.

It's a combination of two ideas that have become central to how I live.

The first comes from karma yoga.

Karma yoga emphasizes action and service without attachment to the results.

For me, that means following opportunities to serve.

When an opportunity appears to help someone, contribute to my community, or make a positive difference, I try to respond.

I don't need to control the outcome.

I don't need recognition or some cosmic reward.

The act of service is enough.

The other side of my philosophy comes from Epicureanism.

Epicurus associated a good life with pleasure, freedom from unnecessary distress, friendship, and thoughtful choices about our desires.

For me, that translates into experiencing the pleasures of life without becoming attached to them.

I want to love.

I want to laugh.

I want to play music, enjoy good food, experience intimacy, have meaningful conversations, and appreciate the extraordinary opportunity of being alive.

I also recognize that suffering is part of the experience.

Grief. Pain. Disappointment. Uncertainty.

They're all part of being human.

The challenge is to experience life without constantly trying to control it.

Pleasure can become craving.

Service can become an obsession with outcomes.

Even spiritual growth can become something we chase as though there's some kind of finish line.

I'm not particularly interested in achieving enlightenment.

I'm not trying to escape the Hindu cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

If my soul has another million lifetimes ahead of it, that's fine.

If this is my one and only human life, that's fine, too.

Right now, this is the one I've got.

And I want to experience it fully.

12. Life Is a Wave

Lately, I've been thinking about life as a wave in the ocean.

A wave begins with wind.

Sometimes that wind is gentle. It moves across the surface of the water and gradually creates something beautiful.

Other times, the wind comes from a violent, dangerous storm.

The conditions that create the wave can be completely different.

I think our lives are much the same.

Some people begin life surrounded by love, security, and encouragement.

Others begin in chaos, fear, abandonment, or pain.

Those early experiences create momentum.

They influence the direction of our lives and shape what happens next.

I sometimes think of my childhood as a wave born from a pretty violent storm.

And that storm shaped me in ways I'm still working to understand.

But the wave doesn't exist in isolation.

It encounters other waves. It combines with them. It changes shape, gains energy, loses energy, and responds to the conditions around it.

Every moment carries the influence of everything that came before.

And yet the future continues to unfold.

There are possibilities in every moment.

Timshel.

We can make choices, even while carrying our past with us.

I've also spent time thinking about the spiritual metaphor of becoming hollow bamboo.

A hollow piece of bamboo can allow air to pass through it and create music.

I like to think of myself as an instrument through which service can happen.

When opportunities to serve appear, I try to follow them.

When opportunities for pleasure appear, I try to experience them.

When suffering appears, I try to accept it as part of life without becoming consumed by it.

And when the moment passes, I try to let it go.

I'm not always particularly good at any of this.

But that's the practice.

I think the point of my life is simply to experience it fully.

To love.

To laugh.

To suffer.

To serve.

To appreciate whatever each moment brings.

And to be the wave.

13. So What Have I Actually Learned About Consciousness?

After 42 published podcast episodes, personal psychedelic journeys, meditation, grief, and years of exploration, what have I actually learned?

Quite a bit.

I've learned that our brains and nervous systems play an enormous role in shaping our conscious experiences.

I've learned that our sense of identity is influenced by biology, memory, relationships, and the stories we've accumulated throughout our lives.

I've learned that altered states can profoundly change how we experience ourselves and our connection to the world.

I've learned that there are serious scientific and philosophical questions about the nature of consciousness that remain unanswered.

And I've encountered fascinating theories about whether consciousness might be fundamental to reality.

Personally, I lean toward believing that we are all connected through something larger than our individual minds.

I suspect that some aspect of consciousness may survive physical death.

I believe love is part of that connection.

But I also recognize that these beliefs are shaped by my experiences.

They're not conclusions I can establish in a laboratory.

And I'm comfortable with that.

Because the greatest lesson I've learned through this journey has very little to do with proving what happens after death.

It has to do with how I choose to live while I'm here.

14. Be Here. Be the Wave.

I would never presume to tell anybody what the purpose of their life should be.

Every life has its own meaning.

And I suspect plenty of people live wonderful, meaningful lives without spending much time thinking about consciousness, enlightenment, or the nature of reality.

Sometimes it takes something extraordinary to send us searching for those answers.

For me, it was the death of my son.

For somebody else, it might be a near-death experience, a psychedelic journey, a serious illness, or simply a moment when the familiar explanations for life no longer seem adequate.

What I've come to understand is that this human experience is extraordinarily precious.

We get to love.

We get to laugh.

We get to suffer.

We get to serve.

We get to experience all the strange, beautiful, painful, ridiculous things that come with being human.

And somewhere along the way, we have opportunities to become more aware of ourselves and the world around us.

Maybe we're individual souls temporarily experiencing human lives.

Maybe we're whirlpools in a universal river of consciousness.

Maybe we're biological organisms whose extraordinarily complex brains produce an experience we call being alive.

I don't know.

And I don't need to know.

I had almost twenty years with my son.

Those years were real.

The love was real.

The experience was real.

And whatever the universe has in store for either of us beyond this life remains a mystery.

So here's where I've landed.

Experience this life fully.

Enjoy the pleasures that come your way without becoming attached to them.

Serve when opportunities to serve appear.

Love people while they're here.

Recognize that suffering is part of the experience.

Let go when the moment has passed.

And remember that whatever storm created your wave, you still have choices about how you live.

The wave will eventually return to the ocean.

What happens then?

Who knows?

For now, be the wave.

Sources and Guest Directory

The conversations below informed this exploration. Podcast links lead to the original episodes. The research references provide additional context for the scientific findings discussed.

Consciousness, Philosophy, and the Self

- **Christof Koch:** Episode 8: Panpsychism and Integrated Information Theory
- **Keith Frankish:** Episode 15: Illusionism, a Theory of Consciousness
- **Michael Graziano:** Episode 19: The Evolution of Consciousness and Attention Schema Theory
- **Donald Hoffman:** Episode 40: Consciousness as Fundamental to Reality
- **Chris Niebauer:** Episode 36: Mind Versus Consciousness, the Split Brain
- **Uriah Kriegel:** Episode 1: Uriah Kriegel

Psychedelics, Neurobiology, and Altered States

- **Katrin Preller:** Episode 26: Neuropharmacology of LSD, Psilocybin, and Consciousness
- **Dennis McKenna:** Episode 41: Consciousness and Psychedelics
- **Raphaël Millière:** Episode 5: Psychedelics and Consciousness, Part 1 and Episode 6: Part 2
- **Andrew Gallimore:** Episode 34: Alien Information Theory
- **Veronica Gold:** Episode 23: The Arizona Psychedelics Conference
- **Sam Ko:** Episode 39: Ketamine, NDE, and Consciousness
- **Albert Garcia-Romeu:** Episode 42: Psilocybin, Addiction, and Consciousness

Near-Death Experiences and Clinical Phenomena

- **Pim van Lommel:** Episode 29: Near-Death Experience and Consciousness
- **Michael Nahm:** Episode 14: Terminal Lucidity and Consciousness
- **Marjorie Woollacott:** Episode 17: Neuroscience, Meditation, and Consciousness
- **Debra Diamond:** Episode 31: NDEs, Death, and Consciousness
- **Kyle Buller:** Episode 23: The Arizona Psychedelics Conference

Metaphysics, Quantum Theory, and the Nature of Reality

- **Bernardo Kastrup:** Episode 16: Consciousness, Idealism, and Baloney
- **Amit Goswami:** Episode 9: Quantum Consciousness
- **Dean Radin:** Episode 13: The Scientific Study of Psi Phenomena and Consciousness
- **Riccardo Manzotti:** Episode 27: The Spread Mind and Episode 30: An Exploration of Consciousness
- **Tim Parks:** Episode 30: An Exploration of Consciousness with Riccardo Manzotti
- **Jill Bolte Taylor:** Episode 37: An Inside View of Consciousness
- **James Glattfelder:** Episode 38: Quantum Physics, Reality, and Consciousness

Selected Research and Philosophical References

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- Psilocybin Desynchronizes the Human Brain, *Nature*, 2024
- Psilocybin-Occasioned Mystical Experiences in the Treatment of Tobacco Addiction, 2014
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- The Consciousness Podcast: Episode Archive

Research note: The paper distinguishes established empirical findings, disputed interpretations, philosophical hypotheses, and personal experiences. Guest quotations have been restored from the supplied transcript-derived document. Scientific interpretation and supporting references are presented separately.