

Book Reviews

Coma, A Healing Journey: A Guide for Family, Friends and Helpers

by Amy Mindell, Ph.D.

Quantum Mind: The Edge Between Physics and Psychology

by Arnold Mindell, Ph.D.

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Reviewed by Pierre Morin, M.D.

Our public health is predominantly influenced by technical progress. Thanks to this, more people who previously would have died soon after their brain injury, heart attack or stroke can be kept alive. The flip side of this is that survivors can be maintained in unconscious states or coma for longer periods. The ethical dimension of this human misfortune has gotten broad public attention resulting in research leading to new ways to help and treat people in comatose states.

In *Coma, a Healing Journey*, Amy Mindell shares with us her wide experience in this challenging field. Her work is based on pioneering research by herself and her husband Arnold Mindell (Mindell, Arnold: 1984).

In Part I of the manual, Dr. Mindell provides us with an overview of the different attitudes and concepts of coma through history, different cultures and today's medical mainstream. She then develops the theoretical bases of the process-oriented approach to comatose states (see also Mindell, Arnold: 1984). In addition, she proposes a new ethical understanding of altered states of consciousness. Parts II and III constitute a practical manual for establishing communication with those in coma for family members, health care professionals, and helpers.

The author's main theme and concern is that people in all states of consciousness go through potentially meaningful inner experiences. For instance, the clinical diagnosis of persistent vegetative state (long-term coma) is normally seen from a viewpoint of pathology, which is based upon a mechanical concept of disease. Amy Mindell's challenging new viewpoint is more phenomenological. She considers coma, like any other altered state of consciousness, an attempt to widen our personal identities. In contradiction to widely accepted medical philosophy, she postulates that the potential for awareness still exists as long as the heart is beating. On this premise, it is of enormous value for the person in an altered state that the caretakers drop their neutral observer position and try to connect with the patient's inner experience.

Amy Mindell believes that we lack sensitive communication techniques that would allow us to better understand the patient's comatose state and experience. In this sense, the manifold exercises shown in the second and third part of the book are meant to broaden our knowledge of comatose states. They help us to develop the skills of joining the comatose person's inner experience.

Demonstrated with carefully chosen illustrations (beautifully created by Robert King), she shows the interested reader how to communicate with the comatose person, and how to respond to his minimal signals and feedback.

In the third part of the book, which addresses professional helpers, she provides more detailed explanations for developing skills and techniques. These include bodywork, movement, and an additional chapter on specific skills for working with brain-injured patients. Both sections provide relatives and caretakers practical and sensitive methods of communicating directly with those in coma. Highly instructive, they provide a unique tool for teaching health care professionals.

As a former assistant medical director of a rehabilitation clinic in Basel, Switzerland, specializing in treating brain injuries, I had the opportunity to implement the author's concepts and skills in the therapeutic program. It had a very beneficial effect on the patients, the family members, and the professional helpers. With our increased awareness for minimal signals and the patients' feedback we were able to improve our diagnostic abilities. We discovered for example, more "locked in" conditions (a situation where the patient is completely paralyzed while his cognition still functions), which we would have overlooked without these new communication techniques.

Establishing a binary system of communication was especially helpful. Binary means that the comatose person can answer your questions with either a "yes" or "no" response using a previously defined movement of any part of the body, such as an eyelid, the mouth, or a finger. The lack of these communication skills could also explain some reports of misdiagnosing PVS (persistent vegetative state) in medical literature (Rosenberg, 1977 and Steinbock, 1989).

The family members of comatose patients in our clinic felt supported in finding ways to relate to their loved ones. They felt less isolated and had a better chance to stay in a bonding relationship with their relative through body and movement contact. The professional helpers found themselves feeling less burned out. They were relieved of having to fight against the heavy impairments of the comatose patient's state. They were able to develop an idea of the patient's inner process and could follow him or her. Furthermore, double-state ethics (see below) helped us to make more informed decisions about prolonging or withdrawing our medical interventions.

In 1990, the US Congress passed the "Patient Self-Determination Act," which was designed to give patients more control over their destiny by the means of advanced directives such as living wills. Amy Mindell proposes in her book a double-state ethic. She believes that it is our ethical responsibility to consult not only the person's prior wishes and the current wishes of family members and medical staff about life-and-death decisions, but also to make every attempt to ask the person in coma. From a normal state of consciousness, highly altered conditions like coma are seen as pathological and represent poor quality of life. The author's experiences show her that people in coma often have significant experiences. When asked through binary communication, some of them respond that, in contradiction to their former statements, they still want to continue living. Others express their wish to die.

In a recent volume of *The Lancet*, English scientists reported the successful detection of brain function (visual recognition of familiar faces) in a 26-year-old

woman who was in a persistent vegetative state and who was otherwise unable to respond to any external stimuli (Menon, 1998). This documents that our knowledge of coma and non-ordinary states of consciousness is very limited.

I believe that our understanding of coma is affected by our reluctance to think about our own death, and is therefore biased. Our tendency to marginalize dreamlike experiences and altered states brings us to project our own fears onto these unknown states. The actual problems around "Right to Die," physician-assisted suicide and coma will therefore, from my point of view, not change until the medical profession and society at large renew their thinking about dying.

Amy Mindell's book offers an incomparable chance to take a first step towards the reform so badly needed. It is also a helpful tool for everybody engaged in the education of health care professionals.

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629 pages, with
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Reviewed by Steven Fenwick, Ph.D.

Carl Jung once predicted that the sciences of physics and psychology would eventually come together to give us a unified view of matter and consciousness. Jung lived during the time when great new discoveries in the areas of relativity and quantum theory were shaking up the foundations of physics as well as our common sense view of reality. Indeed, physics was now telling us that the observer could not be separated from that which is observed, thus introducing subjective awareness into what was once a completely objective reality. It would seem that, like Alice, physics had gone down the rabbit hole into a view of reality that made little common sense to the view of most ordinary people. It seems even today, at the turn of the twenty-first century, most people have not yet caught up with the discoveries of modern physics.

In *Quantum Mind*, Arnold Mindell takes us on a magical journey into this rabbit hole where physics and psychology meet. Mindell is uniquely qualified to help bring about the integration of these fields as predicted by Jung. He is an M.I.T. trained physicist turned psychologist who trained at the Jung Institute in Zurich. He then developed Jungian dream psychology further by connecting it to work with body symptoms, extreme states (psychoses), relationship and family systems, as well as to group and organizational work. Mindell's cutting edge theory is known as "process-oriented psychology" or "process work."

Quantum Mind is Mindell's latest and most ambitious work to date. The book starts by going to the foundational root of basic assumptions about numbers and

mathematics, showing that even counting is based in psychological experience: whenever we are counting one set of things we are discounting something else. He shows us that the “consensus reality” which can be observed and measured by western science arises out of a larger “non-consensus reality” which connects us to dreaming, shamanism, and psychology.

Mindell then proceeds to develop the psychological meaning of such mathematical concepts as imaginary numbers and conjugation and is able to relate these concepts to both dreaming and physics. He then takes us on a wild journey through quantum mechanics, relativity, parallel worlds, non-locality, hyper-spaces, Jung’s concept of synchronicity, the curvature of space-time, big bangs and black holes and the Self-reflecting Universe (and these are just a few of his topics). As daunting as this may sound, especially to the math or science phobic, Mindell manages to make it easy and fun to understand for the beginner. The book is chock full of understandable diagrams and illustrations as well as real life examples and exercises that connect readers to their own inner experiences. Yet at the same time, this book will open new insights for those already conversant in the areas of math, physics and psychology. As an example, I recently had a conversation with an applied mathematician, who does research on modelling ecosystems, who told me that she found this book to be a “breakthrough.”

I personally found this book to be a real mind opener. I was especially excited by his connection between the quantum wave function and dreaming. Mindell writes:

Dreaming is analogous to the invisible period when quantum objects are not being observed. In a dream, your presence can be any place at any time. However, when you are waking up, the awareness of your waking mind lands you in one spot in space and time. No one knows exactly how this “collapse” into a particular spot on earth takes place. Just as there is no theory explaining how you wake up in one spot, there is no agreement in physics as to how observation “collapses the wave function” so that a quantum object appears located in one particular spot. (187)

Mindell shows us that physics is moving towards a viewpoint in which the basic “stuff” of the universe is not particles but sentient awareness, and that this sentience is not limited to human beings but arises throughout nature in the relationship between the observer and the observed.

Mindell ends his book by applying his ideas to the psychology of dreams, to working with physical illness, and to working with the world’s social and environmental problems. It is impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of this book in this short review. I can only encourage you to take this journey with Arnold Mindell down the magic rabbit hole and discover for yourself a world where physics meets dreaming.

Coma, A Healing Journey and *Quantum Mind* are available from Lao Tse Press at www.laotse.com or by calling 1-888-526-8731.