

## **DR. MARJORIE WOOLLACOTT SHARES HER VIEWS ON CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE MATERIALIST WORLDVIEW**

*Marjorie Woollacott, PhD, is the President of the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences (AAPS). She is also Emeritus Professor of Human Physiology, and a member of the Institute of Neuroscience, at the University of Oregon. She was chair of the Human Physiology Department for seven years. She has recently (2017) accepted the position of Research Director for the IANDS.*

As a young neuroscience student, Marjorie Woollacott believed exactly what she was taught to believe in the classroom. “Basically, I was a materialist, because as an undergraduate and graduate student in neuroscience, you learn that the material world is the only real world out there,” recalls Dr. Woollacott. “And I also remember believing that people who were spiritually-oriented tended to be weak minded. That was simply what we were trained to believe in that area at that time.”

Little did Dr. Woollacott realize that her entire belief system would be seriously challenged after she visited her sister in upstate New York and agreed to participate in a meditation retreat in the Catskill Mountains. “My sister had been meditating for a number of years, but it was a completely new experience for me,” says Dr. Woollacott. “I was skeptical, but I was also very curious, so I decided to attend the retreat, try meditation and put my skepticism aside for the weekend.”

The retreat was being conducted by an Indian swami, a master of meditation. “We were told that this meditation master, would be going around the room that first morning, and ‘initiating’ every individual there. And the initiation would be occurring through the swami’s touch. Again, I was skeptical, but I was curious to find out what would happen.”

With the initiation, Dr. Woollacott experienced a profound feeling that she’d never felt before. “When the swami reached me, my eyes were closed, but my senses were otherwise fully engaged. He put his fingers on the bridge of my nose, right between my eyes, and something amazing happened,” remembers Dr. Woollacott. “I felt something like a current of electricity – like a mini lightning bolt -- go from his fingers, down into my body, and ending in my heart. And when I say the heart, I don’t mean the physical heart, but a heart that felt more like a heart than my physical heart has ever felt. I felt this energy expanding through my body, like pure love, like pure nectar flowing through me.

“And words came to my mind, which had nothing to do with my brain or scientific analysis,” continues Dr. Woollacott. “And the words were ‘I’m home, I’m home – my heart is my home.’ I realized that in this moment there was a complete, 180 degree shift in my awareness. When I went back home to my position at a University in Virginia the next morning, I spontaneously woke up at 5 a.m. and got up to meditate. And I’ve been meditating every day since then -- in fact, it’s never ceased.”

Thanks to her trip to the meditation workshop in the Catskill Mountains, Dr. Woollacott had a spiritual epiphany that completely changed her perception of consciousness and the mainstream scientific community. “When I had my first meditation experience, it was a real surprise to me that there was more out there than I had actually perceived before --

and what my neuroscience professors at the university had told me was basically not complete – they said that material reality was all that existed,” says Dr. Woollacott. “So it was a shock to me when I meditated, that I began to feel energy within my body that I had never felt before. This profound experience with meditation went against my materialist worldview that I had held most of my life.” As she continued her research career at the University of Oregon, Dr. Woollacott began to add research on meditation, Tai Chi, and their effects on human attentional abilities to the rehabilitation research she was already engaged in, and has written a number of articles in this area. Her research has shown that meditation improves our attentional abilities, especially in the brain circuitry responsible for executive attention, which includes areas of the frontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex.

If Dr. Woollacott has been able to expand her view of science and consciousness, why are so many other mainstream scientists so resistant to the subjects of meditation, intuition and inspiration? “Well, I think there are two reasons. One is that, for many scientists, this has been their worldview since they began their scientific studies as a university student,” says Dr. Woollacott. “And it can be frightening to let go of a worldview that has been the basis of your entire career.”

For example, many traditional scientists try to find rational explanations for individuals who’ve had near death experiences (NDEs). “These scientists say, ‘Oh, look at near-death experiences. Those people really couldn’t have had awareness outside of their body, or be looking down at the operating room table from the ceiling, because that’s impossible, according to my worldview. The person was either having a hallucination or the doctors were incorrect in thinking that the patient’s brain had flatlined.’ These mainstream scientists always have an explanation about why an NDE couldn’t have happened, because it doesn’t fit with the current paradigm.”

According to Dr. Woollacott, encouraging scientists to have an open mind is one of the primary goals of AAPS (the Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences.) “One of our missions at AAPS is to simply have scientists become a little bit more curious and look more carefully at all of the anomalous data related to the many studies on consciousness, to find out if something like a near-death experience might actually be real.”

Some might find it ironic that scientists – who exist to explore the unknown and reveal new discoveries – could be so closed-minded about spiritual or paranormal experiences. “I think that many scientists – including myself when I was younger – can’t relate to such experiences because they’ve never had these experiences themselves,” maintains Dr. Woollacott.

However, Dr. Woollacott believes that there is positive change on the horizon in the scientific community. “I think that there is beginning to be a momentum that is building up with more and more scientists actually saying that they believe increasing numbers of research studies support the understanding that consciousness is primary,” says Dr. Woollacott. “Once we believe in the interconnectedness of all things – which is really

what a belief in consciousness being primary is about -- we won't see ourselves as separate individuals who are competing for all of the world's resources. Instead, we will see that we are all part of one larger family. And when I say a larger family, I include animals and plants and the entire planet.

“When that happens, we will value things in a whole different way. Instead of trying to use the world's resources to help just one individual – ourselves – we'll realize that we need to share those resources with all the other beings in this world, and to begin to treat the planet as a sacred entity that we want to protect. And if we adopt that attitude, we'll have a much healthier planet, and a much healthier society as well.”

One of the ways that AAPS hopes to raise awareness among the scientific community is by encouraging young scientists – as well as established scientific researchers – to explore new areas of study without feeling ostracized by their peers.

“I think that we need to make a safe place for young people who are interested in doing consciousness studies within our academic communities. And I think one of the goals of the AAPS is to really support young people at universities in any way we can to help them get tenure, get grants, publish papers,” explains Dr. Woollacott. “Because – right now – when one sends a paper to a scientific journal related to, for example, the primacy of consciousness, near-death experiences or other topics like that – what often happens is that the editor of the journal will say, ‘This is outside our purview, and we don't even want to include articles like this in our publication.’

Dr. Woollacott and the AAPS believe that it's time to change that viewpoint. “Instead of discouraging scientists from pursuing new areas of study, we want to encourage journal editors to be curious and say, ‘Wait a minute – this is really a very interesting question and I want our readers to be able to actually look at the facts pro and con, so I want to include papers like this in our journal.’ And of course, that doesn't mean that these articles will not be rigorously peer reviewed -- they will be. But we believe we can learn more about the world by including topics that look at whether consciousness is primary or not, as well as other related topics.”

Dr. Woollacott would like people to go to the AAPS website, [www.aapsglobal.com](http://www.aapsglobal.com) and read the “Frequently Asked Questions” section. “We have 15 frequently asked questions about materialism and other topics, and they answer many of the questions that people have about postmaterialism. I think it's a great part of our website, and it really helps readers understand a little bit more about the controversies surrounding these issues, and why we think it's important to understand consciousness more fully.”

In addition, the AAPS Board of Directors are currently compiling their first written volume, which will include contributions from each AAPS board member. “We'll cover topics like why we believe consciousness is fundamental, why it is primary, and we'll also talk about our own personal transformation during our lives that led us to this particular point,” says Dr. Woollacott. “It will also include some of our research, so I highly recommend this volume to anyone who is interested in these topics, as a way of

learning more about our views on materialism and postmaterialism.” The volume titled, “the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences” is available free of charge to members of AAPS.

Dr. Woollacott finished our discussion by saying that she feels it is an honor to be the president of the AAPS and to be part of a Board with many highly respected researchers in the area of consciousness studies. And she invites scholars, students, and community members interested in this topic to join the Academy and contribute to our continued research and discussion on the primacy of consciousness.