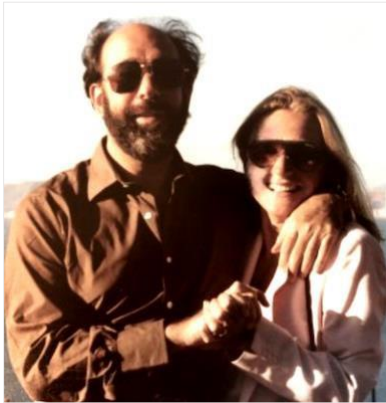


CO-AUTHORING GOD 4.0: ON THE NATURE OF HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE EXPERIENCE CALLED "GOD"

An interview with Sally M. Ornstein



When did you and Robert Ornstein first decide to work on this project together and what was your plan?

The process was quite organic: as I mentioned in my preface to the book, I was initially researching the history of Christianity and its influences which of course led further into religious thought from other traditions. Bob and I would talk about it and then in 2006 our nonprofit, the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge, ran a symposia entitled "The Core of Early Christian Spirituality" at which the religious scholars Elaine Pagels, the late Marvin Meyer and Bart Ehrman participated; and I was inspired to research further, reading many of the alternate gospels, those found at Nag Hammadi. *The Gospel of Thomas* was particularly interesting as an example of Jesus' teaching. It seemed quite familiar probably because it reflects what I now understand to be a perennial quest for conscious evolution, one that has been sought for eons.

And I had always been fascinated by cave art. I wrote a children's story back in 2009 based on the rock art of Africa, and that interest led us both to the work of David Lewis-Williams who worked with the San people, a contemporary hunter-gatherer society of Southern Africa. Lewis-Williams later carried out research with Jean Clottes examining Paleolithic cave art and what generated it. Bob – of course – always interested in consciousness, was fascinated with the concepts that Lewis-Williams shows to be ingrained in our consciousness since that time 35,000 years ago: the three-tiered cosmos – Heaven above, here on earth and Hell below; and the three levels of consciousness experienced in trance states. The universality of these experiences proves that rather than being a facet of enculturation, they had to be innate – reflecting a capacity for transcendence that we all share.

And then Bob took off from there, pursuing the neurobiology of altered states of consciousness and the implications thereof and the psychological findings that demonstrate the foundation upon which altered states of consciousness are built.

Of course, he saw these steps as a whole, and that became the book.

What were your challenges and what did you learn from the process of bringing it to final publication on your own?

Thankfully, by the time he was too ill to continue working, he had completed his unique contribution to the book. By that I mean, he understood and had described the evolutionary foundations upon which altered states of consciousness are based and the neurobiology and contributing psychological aspects of this, what in the book he calls our “second system.” He had made the connections, and indeed he said to me – it’s all about connection, that’s key. This led him to the major insight he describes as “GOD-4.0” – that “God” is a description of a perceived expanded connection. It is an ability within all of us that is dormant but can be developed – it is not a belief. In his typical humorous style, Bob said the new mantra should be: “It’s not what you believe, it’s what you perceive.”

The metaphors that have come down to us over the centuries that describe this nonverbal experience were certainly functional at the time and likely still work for some – by that I mean familiarity with them helped people envisage and develop an expanded consciousness. But today the response to them is likely to be emotional at best, and at worst they are taken literally. This has caused controversy and even violence between religions, and endless perceived differences, since the time of Copernicus, between religion and science. But now – well, since the Second World War and particularly since the 60s – there’s so much new information from both the sciences and religious history that we can understand the whole, and the controversies can melt away. As we say in the book: it’s time for a new view.

The three books in this series were published almost two decades apart – three decades between *The Evolution of Consciousness* and *God 4.0*. How do you see the progression of ideas from one to the other?

Actually, all three books together provide a fundamental understanding of consciousness. *The Psychology of Consciousness* (now in its 4th edition) first described the differentiation between the left and right hemispheres. Going beyond the finding that creative impulses originate in the right side of the brain and rational impulses in the left, the book looks at traditional spiritual teachings from the East, directing our attention to examples and strategies that address the development of a comprehensive expanded consciousness.

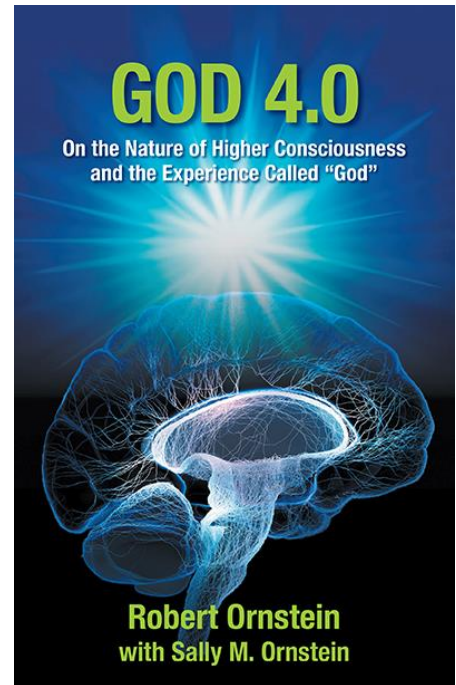
The Evolution of Consciousness – with the aid of wonderful drawings by Ted Dewan – describes the whole evolution of our brain. At the end of the story so far we have a bunch of different unconscious minds – what Bob describes as a “squadron of

simpletons” – geared to survival in a world long gone. These simpletons are what get us into trouble. They need to be, if not controlled, at least orchestrated. Bob describes strategies and practical sources for finding and fostering the “conductor” or “driver” of the crowd, and he suggests that doing so is an essential first step to understanding who we are and what we might become.

In *God 4.0* we ask and answer these fundamental questions: What does it mean to go beyond our ordinary perception of reality? Why has almost all of humanity, throughout our history, had the concept of transcendence and connection to “the other – to “the spirit world,” to “God,” or to “the One behind it all”?

The experiences of spiritual teachers from many traditions led them to understand intuitively that what we call “God” describes a perceptive capacity innate in all of us. The Sufi Ibn El Arabi, for example, in the 13th century, described “God” as the impulse upon which other developments can occur, and “angels” as “the powers hidden in the faculties and organs of man.” Today we need to be able to describe this experience in a way that is more acceptable to us – and psychology and neurobiology provide this new view and a new language to describe it. As a psychologist, Bob saw his role as interpreting these mystical experiences in a new more relevant way – that is, in neurobiological terms.

Once we understand that these transcendent experiences describe the activation of a dormant faculty within each of us that we can develop and use, we can look again at the words of our prophets and spiritual teachers, but in a new way, one devoid of emotionality. We can understand them more as technical information, the function of which is to switch our own cognition into this “second system.” So when, for example, in the 10th century the mystic poet Hallaj was killed for shockingly saying “I am the Truth,” he was not only describing a nonverbal transcendent experience, but doing so in a way that – because it was a shocking, even blasphemous statement at the time – might jolt those hearing it away from their normal restricted cognition to a more comprehensive right-hemisphere view. And let’s not forget that Jesus Himself says the same thing. For example, in John 14:6 He says: “I am the way and the truth and the life.”



Were there cultural and scientific developments between each of these books that impacted this progression?

Well, Bob couldn't have written the *Psychology of Consciousness* without the work of Joseph Bogen who pioneered split brain surgery which he performed on epileptic patients and consequently discovered that the brain's two hemispheres functioned differently from one another. We certainly could not have written *God 4.0* without his and Roger Sperry's work and the many other amazing discoveries over the last sixty years in so many fields: in anthropology, archeology, primatology, paleoanthropology, psychology, neurobiology and religious history – and even botany! We list and expand on these in the book.

For example, we used to assume that morality came from religion – that without religion we'd be as barbaric as our simian relatives. But now we know that's not true – that in one sense you could say that morality came down to us from plants, which biologists have discovered have amazing strategies for looking after their own kind. Certainly, primatologists such as Franz de Waal and other animal behaviorists have demonstrated again and again how not only our nearest relatives, chimps or bonobos, but even rats can show altruism, refraining from eating for as long as 12 days when they see that their eating hurts another rat. Studies show that human babies as young as three months old overwhelmingly prefer a puppet toy which behaves fairly over one which is mean. On the other side, it's interesting to note that just seeing an image of a pair of eyes (versus say a bunch of flowers) on a notice asking for honor contributions triggers an amazing uptick of honorable responses.

So many modern discoveries have shown that, to quote the 20th century writer, Robert Ardrey, we are not fallen angels but risen apes ... but the evidence that we show in *God 4.0* is that we have undervalued our potential and overvalued our inventions. It's time to change that.

How did Shah's writing and work influence the book?

I would venture to say that Shah's work has been a pivotal influence in all Bob's works and *GOD 4.0* is no exception. In the book we address the history and value of stories and storytellers. How stories were adapted to suit different nations, societies, and different times; we explain that aspects of stories were incorporated into other stories – that plagiarism, ownership of stories, was nonexistent. The important thing was that they had an instrumental function. They were repeated as entertainment which provided the 'Moses Basket' so-to-speak, ensuring that the learning they contained was maintained and

dispersed.

But times change and – especially since printed stories became prevalent – stories, biblical stories and folktales such as those of Aesop, were revised, retold, tidied up and rewritten in a simplified form, often with a moral ending, or interpreted as literal historical truth, rather than as instruments for brain development.

Luckily for us, the work of Idries Shah revitalized the use of the story as an instrument for cognitive development.

We explain that the teaching stories, narratives, and poems that Shah collected for the contemporary reader were especially selected by him because they stimulate the mind along unfamiliar pathways, leading to a higher state of consciousness. We describe how the practice of repeatedly reading his works is a key in the development of this second system of perception.

Through Shah we certainly learned that the crucial to this expanded perception was to serve rather than be served. That practicing virtues, such as generosity, humility, forgiveness were indispensable to human progress. It turns out, as Bob describes in the book, that selflessness and virtues affect brain function – they are a necessary component of the brain's ability to switch to the second system of cognition – a shift that requires us to get the “self” the “me-first” out of the way and allow other wider connections to be directly perceived.

Shah wrote that people weren't ready for God. That we needed to work on ourselves first. Do you see it that way?

Absolutely. Bob describes the neurobiological activation of this second system of cognition and perception as on a continuum: from a small insight by which one solves a problem at work; to the creative experiences of artists, poets, and sportsmen; to the intuitions of great scientists, like Einstein, mathematicians like Ramanujan, artists like Michelangelo; and finally to the transformative insights of our major prophets and religions teachers, such as Jesus, Mohammad, Hallaj, Rumi, Ibn el Arabi and others.

We emphasize that the revelations and insights of our Prophets and spiritual teachers come from an experience at the far end of this continuum. These non-verbal experiences could only be described metaphorically, for example, as “seeing God.” They are the result of extraordinary preparation, discipline and dedication, and were likely built upon an above-average propensity – even genetic – for higher intuitive thinking. These individuals are described as “returning to the world” – that is to normal consciousness –

but endowed with this additional cognitive ability – so can be said to be “in the world but not of the world” and their service to the world has been and is extraordinary.

It is thanks to them that this higher faculty has been fostered. The literature: poetry, narratives, and teaching-stories that they left behind were both instructional and instrumental, selected by them to raise the awareness and the operation of this innate faculty as the time, circumstances and people allowed.

Shah very much encouraged people to study western psychology, to make better use of it. Do you see that happening?

No, not really. For example, I remember well Shah emphasizing how important it was for us to understand how indoctrination worked. He suggested that it needed to be understood by the culture as a whole, so that we could recognize when we were being manipulated and be less inclined to be caught up in it. Or the many times he pointed out how group-thinking can so easily override people’s common sense – and that this should be common knowledge. I don’t see those lessons absorbed by contemporary culture at all – at least not here in the US.

But all is not, as yet, lost. I think it’s high time for those of us who can, to take steps to ensure that our schools have access to a new curriculum in which understanding ourselves becomes at least as important as math, geography, and the like. Shah’s teaching stories for children are already playing a part in this and hopefully we can expand upon this in the future.

We all need to understand our human nature – not only its weaknesses and how to overcome them, but also its enormous potential and how to cultivate that. As Shah said: “You must conceive of possibilities beyond your present state if you are to be able to find the capacity to reach towards them.”

Our hope is that *GOD 4.0* helps in this endeavor. That readers will understand that we are all endowed with higher perceptive capacities that if developed can truly be useful – and not only for ourselves and our personal life issues. The neurobiological description of this additional perceptive ability could help us reconcile religion and science and come together to solve our shared global problems in a new, more objective way that Bob described as “a new spiritual literacy.”