

An interview with Stanislav Grof, published in the Russia newspaper Pravda on January 12, 2007.

Stanislav Grof: “People Are Governed by Matrices.”

Stanislav Grof attained great fame by his books *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, *The Adventure of Self-Discovery*, *Psychology of the Future*, and others. In his bestseller *The Human Encounter with Death* (co-authored by Joan Halifax) Grof described clinical findings related to mystical illuminations, which were induced in terminally ill cancer patients in sessions with LSD-25. This book became the focus of interest of many religious representatives; references to it can thus be found in the excellent book by the important Russian orthodox thinker Father Serafim (Rouz) “*The Soul After Death*.”

Grof was in our country for the first time in 1961 and arrived also in 1964 to get acquainted with the studies of neuroses in monkeys in the Monkey Farm in Suchumi. But the visit of Grof and his wife in April 1989 following the invitation by the Soviet Ministry of Health. Stanislav and Chistina Grof gave lectures about holotropi breathwork at the Institute of Psychoendocrinological Center on Arbat Street for thousands of followers of their ideas, who came from all over the Soviet Union. At that time, the Academy of Sciences published a series of Grof’s books – 500 of each of them. In the following years, practically all of the books of this scientist have been published in Russia, with the exception of *LSD Psychotherapy*. Telecanal TNT is finishing its work on the documentary in four parts, about the life and work of this great innovator; it will be released this year.

From the Editorial Board.

We are expressing our thanks to Vladimir Maykov, Director of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology for his help in establishing direct contact with Stanislav Grof.

We are ready to give word to the opponents of Doctor Grof, especially to the Director of the Serbskovo Center for Forensic and Social Medicine Tatyana Dmitrieva in regard to the entire complex of questions that the outstanding scientist mentioned in his interview.

We would like to point out that the psychoactive substances

mentioned by Stanislav Grof (LSD, psilocybin, DMT, MDMA, and ketamine) are at present officially prohibited on an international scale in terms of their production, distribution, and use of any kind. In agreement with the opinion of official medicine, use of these compounds, especially without supervision, represents a threat to health; it can cause psychological disturbances and lead to destructive behavior.

Interviewer Andrey Scherbakov

Carl Gustav Jung used to say that the psyche of a baby cannot be referred to as *tabula rasa*. Your ground-breaking research works exploring the fields of human unconscious allowed to prove it by means of opening perinatal and transpersonal fields of psychology. Why does official medicine still ignore your discoveries?

Modern consciousness research has brought overwhelming evidence that the understanding of consciousness and the model of the human psyche currently dominating academic psychiatry and psychology is superficial and inadequate. To account for the observations from LSD research, I had to create a vastly expanded model of the psyche by adding two large realms - the *perinatal domain* (related to memories of prenatal life and biological birth) and the *transpersonal domain* (containing experiences of identification with other people and other species, episodes from the life of our human and animal ancestors, and Jung's historical and archetypal collective unconscious). This new expanded map shows great similarity with Jung's image of the psyche, with one major exception. To my surprise and disappointment, Jung vehemently denied that biological birth has any psychological significance and that it represents a major psychotrauma. In an interview conducted toward the end of his life, he quite explicitly dismissed this possibility by pointing to the fact that birth is an experience that we all share.

Traditional psychiatrists are aware of the existence of perinatal and transpersonal experiences, since these spontaneously occur in some of their patients. However, they do not consider them to be normal constituents of the human psyche and see them as products of an unknown pathological process afflicting the brain. People, who have these experiences are considered to be psychotic, that means severely mentally ill. The resistance of the academic circles to the discoveries of modern

consciousness research and transpersonal psychology is understandable. The revolutionary new data cannot be handled by small modifications of current theories (what we call technically “ad hoc hypotheses”). Facing them would lead to a radical revision of our thinking comparable to what the physicists had to go through in the first three decades of the twentieth century, when they had to shift from Newtonian understanding of matter to quantum-relativistic physics. The new findings have also profound implications that reach far beyond the conceptual frameworks of psychiatry and psychology; they question the basic philosophical assumptions of Western science. They undermine its monistic materialistic orientation and suggest a worldview that resembles that of the great Eastern spiritual philosophies.

Do you remember your first transpersonal experience? What made you abandon the materialistic outlook that is so traditional for doctors and acknowledge spirituality as the driving force of man and the world on the whole?

I certainly do remember it; it was so extraordinary and overwhelming that it would be difficult to forget. It happened in November 1956 when I volunteered to be an experimental subject for an LSD session. The design of this experiment included exposure to a powerful stroboscopic light at the time when my LSD experience was culminating. My consciousness left my body and all boundaries in the universe dissolved. I had an awe-inspiring experience of Cosmic Consciousness; I ceased to exist as an individual being and became all of existence. I described this experience in my book *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities* that is about to be released in Russian translation. This experience was powerful enough to create in me a lifelong interest in non-ordinary states of consciousness, but not powerful enough to undermine my materialistic worldview, which had been deeply instilled in me during my medical studies. That change took years of daily observations in psychedelic sessions of my clients and my own and later in sessions of holotropic breathwork, a non-drug method of therapy and self-exploration that I have developed jointly with my wife Christina. Today I am absolutely convinced that the current scientific paradigm needs a radical revision.

The method of holotropic respiration and holotropic therapy that you

and your wife Christina devised resembles ancient breathing practices that were found in many religious traditions. However, many people doubt if it could be possible to enter the depth of the human unconscious in such an easy way?

I completely understand their doubts. I thought for many years that it takes powerful psychoactive substances – like LSD and other psychedelics – to induce non-ordinary states of consciousness. It came as a surprise to me how profound impact simple means like faster breathing, evocative music, and bodywork can have on consciousness. However, shamans and native cultures in general have known it for millennia and used these “technologies of the sacred” in their healing, ritual, and spiritual practice. These observations have shown us that the gap between so called normal state of consciousness and non-ordinary states is not as deep as we thought. Many people can have episodes of these states spontaneously, in the middle of everyday life.

You say that many non-ordinary states of consciousness, which are defined as manifestations of mental diseases by traditional medicine, are actually psycho-spiritual crises. A person can overcome the crisis and thus change himself or herself in a positive way. Can you describe several situations from your own medical experience to exemplify such remarkable metamorphoses?

When we realize that perinatal and transpersonal experience are normal constituents of the human psyche, it radically changes the questions we ask about such episodes and how we answer these questions. It will also lead to entirely different treatment strategies. The question is not how the brain generates these experiences and what pathological process causes it, The experiences that emerge in these states represent normal constituents of the human psyche. The question is why some people have to take psychedelic substances or use some powerful non-drug techniques to experience these deep contents of the unconscious psyche, while in others these contents emerge spontaneously. And when these states are correctly understood and supported, they can be healing, transformative, and even evolutionary. Christina and I call them “spiritual emergencies”; this name suggests that they represent a crisis, but also an opportunity to emerge (the Latin “emergere”) to a higher level of consciousness and psychological functioning.

It was previously believed that mystical experience can be cognized by very few people only, by those who possess extraordinary gifts bestowed on them by God. You believe that this experience can be available to everyone. How could it be possible?

Our experience with the holotropic breathwork and with psychedelics have convinced us that the capacity to have mystical experiences represents a basic human birth right; in principle, anybody can have them, although for some people it is easier than for others. We can think here about a large spectrum, where on one side of it are people who find it difficult to enter these states in spite of the fact that they would like to and are trying hard to induce them. On the other side of the spectrum are people, in whom these experiences emerge in the middle of their everyday life, often against their will, and it is difficult for them to relate to ordinary reality. C. G. Jung belonged to this latter category and was able to use his easy access to the unconscious as a source of a revolutionary new psychology.

You considered psychedelics as catalysts of the altered states of consciousness before they were officially banned. In your book *Psychology of the Future* you raise a question of necessity to discuss political, legal and social aspects of psychedelics. To which extent could this issue be actual and possible on the international level, for example for the World Health Organization?

The WHO is actually already involved in the control of psychoactive substances and the member states of the WHO are obliged to meet its recommendations. Psychedelics are currently listed in Schedule I, defined as drugs with no therapeutic value and high abuse potential. This listing is clearly erroneous. Research has shown that properly used, psychedelics have great therapeutic potential and that they are not physiologically addictive. There seems to be increasing dissatisfaction with psychiatric therapy limited to routine suppression of symptoms by tranquilizers without addressing the underlying problems and awareness of the side effects resulting from their chronic administration. A willingness to look for alternatives has resulted in a few new research projects involving psychedelics, conducted in the USA and several other countries.

You have been to the Soviet Union and then to Russia several times. Are Russians ready to understand your ideas, or the ideas of other specialists of transpersonal psychology? Is there anyone from Russian philosophers, psychologists and psychiatrists whom you could point out and what for?

Russian colleagues have been remarkably open to these new ideas, including many professionals in the academic circles. I was very moved during one of my early visits to Moscow when somebody gave me a Russian translation of my book *Realms of the Human Unconscious* issued by the Samizdat. He told me that all my books had been translated and published in the Soviet Union by underground press. Being from Czechoslovakia, I was familiar with the Communist regime and I realized the serious risks these people were taking to make my books available to Russian readers. I kept this book as a very treasured souvenir of my visit to Russia. Unfortunately, it was destroyed in February 2001 in the fire of our house, together with the rest of my library and all our other belongings.

I think there are many reasons for Russian openness to transpersonal psychology. First, it is the deep innate spirituality of Russian people. Vladimir Maykov, my close friend and foremost representative of transpersonal psychology in Russia, included in his book *Transpersonal Psychology: Origins, History, Present-Day State* an entire chapter showing how many people of Russian origin played an important role in the history of transpersonal ideas. Among them are many famous names – Elena Petrovna Blavatskaya, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff, Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdyaev, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, and Vassily Nalimov. And spirituality, this vital feature of Russian personality was subjected to severe repression during the years of the Soviet regime and the long repressed was ready to emerge and return into the culture.

Vladimir Maykov has also significantly contributed to the fact that transpersonal psychology and new paradigm thinking are so well-known and accepted in Russia. He has arranged high quality translation and publication of the most important transpersonal books and conducts highly professional theoretical and practical training in this field, including that of holotropic breathwork facilitators. He also organized a meeting of the European Transpersonal Association (Eurotas) that mediated contact between Russian transpersonal circles and colleagues from other countries of the world.

Another reason for the popularity of transpersonal psychology among Russian colleagues is the fact that under the Soviet regime, psychiatry was limited to a small number of politically acceptable approaches, such as those based on the work of I.P.Pavlov. Ideas coming from the West were subjected to strict censorship and the contact with Western scientists and access to world literature was very difficult. When the old system collapsed, this created a great vacuum and eagerness in Russian professionals to catch up with the development in the world. By comparison, the chairs of psychiatry and psychology at the American universities have been for many decades occupied by conservative professionals with biological, neo-Freudian, and behaviorist background, or some other traditional orientations, who have resisted new paradigm thinking.

Jung raised the question about the catastrophe of traditional psychiatric treatment. Little has changed since that time. Psychotherapy exists only for the elite so to speak, whereas state-run psychiatric hospitals are full of miserable patients who suffer from pills and vicious treatment. Is it possible to break away from that vicious circle?

There certainly is a growing dissatisfaction with the status quo and urgent need for a radical change. Whether or not psychedelics will return into psychiatry and will again become part of the therapeutic armamentarium is a complex problem and its solution will probably be determined not only by the results of scientific research, but also by a variety of political, legal, economic, and mass-psychological factors. At present, academic institutions and clinical facilities have not yet accepted experiential psychotherapies which are much milder and less radical than psychedelic therapy, for example, Gestalt practice and holotropic breathwork.

However, I believe that Western society is at present much better equipped to accept and assimilate psychedelics than it was in the 1950s. At the time when psychiatrists and psychologists started to experiment with LSD, psychotherapy was limited to verbal exchanges between therapist and clients. Intense emotions and active behavior were referred to as "acting-out" and were seen as violations of basic therapeutic rules. Psychedelic sessions were on the other side of the spectrum, evoking dramatic

emotions, psychomotor excitement, and vivid perceptual changes. They thus seemed to be more like states that psychiatrists considered pathological and tried to suppress by all means than conditions to which one would attribute therapeutic potential. This was reflected in the terms "hallucinogens," "delirogens," "psychotomimetics," and "experimental psychoses," used initially for psychedelics and the states induced by them. In any case, psychedelic sessions resembled more scenes from anthropological movies about healing rituals of "primitive" cultures and other aboriginal ceremonies than those expected in a psychiatrist's or psychotherapist's office. In addition, many of the experiences and observations from psychedelic sessions seemed to seriously challenge the image of the human psyche and of the universe developed by Newtonian-Cartesian science. I have included many specific examples of this in my book *When the Impossible Happens*.

The last three decades have brought many revolutionary changes that have profoundly influenced the climate in the world of psychotherapy. Humanistic and transpersonal psychology have developed powerful experiential techniques that emphasize deep regression, direct expression of intense emotions, and bodywork leading to release of physical energies. Among these new approaches to self-exploration are Gestalt practice, bioenergetics and other neo-Reichian methods, primal therapy, rebirthing, and holotropic breathwork. The inner experiences and outer manifestations, as well as therapeutic strategies, in these therapies bear a great similarity to those observed in psychedelic sessions. These non-drug therapeutic strategies involve not only a similar spectrum of experiences, but also comparable conceptual challenges. As a result, for therapists practicing along these lines, the introduction of psychedelics would represent the next logical step rather than dramatic change in their practice.

Moreover, the Newtonian-Cartesian thinking in science, which in the 1960s enjoyed great authority and popularity, has been progressively undermined by astonishing developments in a variety of disciplines. This has happened to such an extent that an increasing number of scientists feel an urgent need for an entirely different world-view, a new scientific paradigm. It is very encouraging to see that all these new developments that are in irreconcilable conflict with traditional science seem to be compatible with the findings of psychedelic research and with transpersonal psychology. The ideas of pioneers like Fritjof Capra, David Bohm, Amit Goswami, Karl Pribram, Ilya Prigogine, Rupert Sheldrake, Ervin Laszlo, and others, are

becoming increasingly relevant. Even more encouraging than the changes in the general scientific climate is the fact that, in a few cases, researchers of the younger generation in the United States, Switzerland, and other countries have in recent years been able to obtain official permission to start programs of psychedelic therapy, involving LSD, psilocybin, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), methylene-dioxy-methamphetamine (MMDA), and ketamine. I hope that this is the beginning of a renaissance of interest in psychedelic research that will eventually return these extraordinary tools into the hands of responsible therapists.

Jung's theory of collective unconscious says that chaotic forces of the dark side of human soul determine people's lives and history. Modern history proves it entirely. Pessimism has become the common state of mind and soul for smart individuals. Can transpersonal psychology in a combination of world religions change anything in people's lives, or is it too late?

Psychedelic research, work with holotropic breathwork, and therapy with people undergoing spiritual emergencies certainly confirmed Jung's discovery of dark and ominous aspects of the human psyche that he called the Shadow. I have myself written repeatedly about the perinatal and transpersonal roots of human violence and greed. My book *Psychology of the Future*, in which I summarize the findings of my consciousness research over a period of about 50 years, has an entire chapter on this subject, entitled *Consciousness Evolution and Human Survival: Transpersonal Perspective on the Global Crisis*. In it I show that transpersonal psychology and modern consciousness research offer revolutionary new insights into the roots of the current global crisis and new approaches to its alleviation. There is a general agreement in transpersonal circles that all the different facets of the current global crisis political, diplomatic, economic, ecological, military, and religious – have one common denominator. They reflect the state of consciousness evolution of the human species and cannot be resolved without a profound psychospiritual transformation of large number of people. The question arises: what are our chances that this would really happen?

As modern consciousness research has shown, the roots of human violence and greed lie very deep in the perinatal and transpersonal domains of the psyche, much deeper than academic psychiatry ever suspected,

Traditional forms of verbal psychotherapy operate on the level of postnatal biography and cannot reach these levels. That would seem to paint a very pessimistic prospect for any radical positive change of human nature. However, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have developed effective experiential methods of self-exploration, healing, and personality transformation. Some of these come from modern therapeutic traditions, others represent adaptations of ancient and native spiritual practices. There exist approaches with a very favorable ratio between professional helpers and clients and others that can be practiced in the context of self-help groups. Systematic work with them can lead to a spiritual opening, a move in a direction that is sorely needed on a collective scale for our species to survive. It is essential to spread the information about these possibilities and get enough people personally interested in pursuing them. An important part of these efforts would be creation of a network providing psychological assistance and support to individuals undergoing spontaneous psychospiritual transformation in spiritual emergencies. Currently, many of these people are misdiagnosed as suffering from psychosis and the potentially healing and evolutionary process of transformation is arrested by tranquilizing medication.

We seem to be involved in a dramatic race for time that has no precedent in the entire history of humanity. What is at stake is nothing less than the future of life on this planet. If we continue the old strategies, which in their consequences are clearly extremely destructive and self-destructive, it is unlikely that the human species will survive. However, if a sufficient number of people undergo a process of deep inner transformation, we might reach a stage and level of consciousness evolution when we will deserve the name we have so proudly given to our species – *homo sapiens sapiens*.