

## SOUNDS TRUE: INSIGHTS AT THE EDGE

**Stanislav Grof: Learning from Non-Ordinary States**  
**Interviewed by Tami Simon - Tuesday, August 24, 2010**

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Tami Simon: I'd love to begin, Stan, by giving our listeners a bit of background and a framework for your work and your teaching. I wonder if you can just tell us a little bit about your early work, and specifically how you became so interested in non-ordinary states of consciousness.

Stanley Grof: My original interest in psychiatry came from reading Freud. Just at the time when I was actually committing to a completely different profession—I wanted to work in animated movies—a friend of mine gave me *Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*. I started reading it in the evening and couldn't stop. I read through the night, and within a few days I decided, "This is what I want to be. I want to be a psychoanalyst." So I enrolled in the medical school instead, and then, as I was getting deeper involved with Freudian analysis, I became increasingly disappointed with it. Initially, it was not the theory, it was more the practical inefficacy—you know, that it takes years, and even after years, the results don't seem to be breathtaking. And so I was in a state, kind of a crisis where I started regretting that I'd chosen psychiatry and psychoanalysis, and started kind of nostalgically thinking back to animated movies.

Just at that time, we got a supply of LSD from Sandos with a letter saying that this was a very interesting new investigational substance whose psychoactive effects were discovered by Dr. Hoffman (He accidentally intoxicated himself.) and it described a pilot study that Dr. Stahl did with the son of Dr. Hoffman's boss in Zurich with a group of psychiatric patients and a group of "normal" volunteers. They said they felt that this would be something interesting for psychiatrists and psychologists, and would we want to do some experiments and let them know if there was a legitimate use for it? They gave a couple of tips: One was that they felt that maybe this could be used as a kind of model psychosis, or experimental psychosis, where we could give it to "normal" people, do all kinds of tests before, during, and after, and get some insights in to what might be happening in people who have spontaneous episodes of these non-ordinary states. Then there was a second tip, which kind of became my destiny or karma, whatever you want to call it. They suggested that maybe this could be used as a kind of unconventional training tool for psychiatrists or psychologists that this would give us a chance to

spend a few hours in the world that seems to be similar to the world where our patients live.

You know, I was experiencing this real disappointment with psychiatry, and this looked like an exciting new possibility, so I became one of the early volunteers. I had a powerful, powerful transforming experience that created a kind of a lifetime interest in non-ordinary states, where it became my passion, profession, vocation.

TS: Can you give us an idea: How many journeys did you go on where you were accompanying people as part of your research?

SG: Well, I've done, over half a century, over 4,000 sessions with others. I was also experimenting, myself, with all of the substances that we were using with our patients and clients.

TS: And I know this is a big question, but could you say that there were certain themes, or the most important insights that you received from these 4,000 sessions, plus your own? Like the top-level highlights that have informed your work?

SG: Well, I think the major thing that happened was I was coming into this experimentation with a completely atheistic background. You know, my parents met in a small Czech town, and when they wanted to get married, there was a problem because my father's family didn't have any church affiliation, and my mother's family was strictly Catholic, and the local church refused to marry them until they got a major financial contribution from my grandparents, from my mother's side. And so my parents got so disenchanted with anything related to religion that they didn't commit me or my brother to any religion. They said that you should basically make your choice when you come of age, and so, from this kind of atheistic background, I went to medical school at the time when we had a Marxist regime, so this was not something that was cultivating spiritual awareness. So the major thing that happened for me was to open me to a mystical worldview, to spirituality, which is certainly something that I had not expected.

And then there were many, many (of course) specific insights. The first one was that the sessions wouldn't take us—by that, I mean myself and my clients—just to the part of the psyche described in psychoanalysis, which is basically post-natal biography and the Freudian individual unconscious. But sooner or later, the sessions started taking us into a realm that I now call *perinatal*. This was a major

discovery, that there was a powerful record, a powerful imprint in the psyche, of the whole birth process, with all the emotions, with all the physical feelings, and that is like a reservoir of difficult emotions that plays a very important role in the development of different kinds of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, and then going back there and reliving that, and processing those emotions and relieving those energies is a major, major therapeutic mechanism.

I had to struggle with this, because in my medical training, there was no way you could relive birth. The idea was that the cerebral cortex of the newborn is not finished, is not *myelinated* (as it is called), and that there cannot be any memory, that the newborn is unconscious and the experience is not recorded anywhere. And so this took me a while to adjust to and realize that somehow current psychiatry and brain research had it wrong.

But even before I got familiar and comfortable with this perinatal level, it started opening into a new realm which we now call *transpersonal*, which means that there were experiences of going back into previous centuries and other countries, sometimes with a sense of personal remembering, and then we were in the realm of reincarnation, karma. People were having experiences that they believed to be memories from previous lifetimes. I can find the connection to the present lifetime and healing, in this process, of many emotional and psychosomatic problems.

Then the other thing that happened: The experiences moved from human consciousness into the animal realm, and there were very, very authentic identifications with various other living organisms, life forms, from primates all the way down to unicellular organisms. Again, this was a major, major (as you can imagine) shocking discovery. The experiences sometimes went into the botanical realm! I remember experiencing a very convincing identification with a sequoia tree, for example, or in one of my sessions, I became a carnivorous plant, digesting a fly with experiences that I couldn't conjure up in my everyday consciousness. It certainly wasn't coming up from something I had read or experienced in the movies and so on.

And then yet another major, major experience or experiential realm was the Jungian archetypal unconscious—you know, coming into the realm of mythological beings, deities, demonic presences, kind of abodes of the beyond—paradises, hells, heavens, and so on—and finally, experiences of oneness with the divine, or experiences of the *supreguas mit* metacosmic void, the kind of experiences that you never heard in psychology or psychiatry, except maybe in some pathological contexts, as something that psychotic patients experience, but

experiences that were described in detail in what is actually called perennial philosophy, you know, the different Eastern philosophies and mystical systems of the world.

It would be difficult to pin down one particular experience, but certainly the transformation from an atheist to somebody who is more like a mystic, and then this discovery of the vastness of the psyche, those were the major surprises for me.

TS: Well, I mean, Stan, listening to you, it's so huge what you're reporting! Just to help me in terms of my own history and knowledge of the development of psychiatry in the West: When you started, were the perinatal and transpersonal dimensions just not considered part of the dialogue?

SG: It certainly was not part of the dialogue in traditional academic psychiatry and psychology, but these kinds of ideas appeared in the very stormy and kind of complex history of psychoanalysis. Freud surrounded himself with very talented people. Many of them developed variations of psychoanalysis that went beyond Freud. There was, for example Otto Rank, who was out telling Freud, worked on a book called *The Trauma of Birth*, gave it to Freud for his birthday, creating an emotional shock in Freud that, according to Agnes Jones, the biographer, it took Freud four months to recover from. So that was something that emerged in psychoanalysis, but was not, certainly, embraced by the whole psychology community, only by a fraction of analysts. Also, Rank's idea about birth was a little different from what emerged with psychedelic research or the holotropic breathwork that we are doing now. Then, of course, there was Carl Gustav Jung, who came up with the idea that we don't have just the individual unconscious, but we have a collective unconscious where the entire history of humanity is recorded, and also the cultural history, the cultural inheritance, experiences of different cultures, even cultures that we have not studied or the we don't have any intellectual knowledge of.

There was, of course, another renegade, and that was Wilhelm Reich, who pointed out that what we are dealing with in emotional psychosomatic disorders are not just memories of traumatic situations of various kinds, but that we carry very, very powerful blockages, what he called "character armor," that he saw as kind of jammed sexual energy due to the fact that we, as humans in modernity, don't have free and full sexual lives. So again, this is something that emerged in psychedelic work, the awareness of how many pent-up bio-energies we carry in our body.

TS: Now you mentioned something very interesting to me when you were talking about how traditional psychiatry viewed memories from the birth experience: that we don't have the mental capacity, I guess you said, because of certain myelin that's formed in our brain, to have these memories, and that this caused a conundrum for you, how you could understand what you were experiencing, both in yourself and through the psychedelic research, and then later—and we'll talk about this in a bit—the therapy you developed, holotropic breathwork therapy, where people are reliving these birth memories. How do you explain our access to birth memories and non-ordinary states, given that scientific perspective about how the brain forms?

ST: Well, you know, there's no problem in this regard, with perinatal experiences, because there is a brain, there is a highly developed part of the nervous system in the newborn, and it's actually quite surprising and shocking that traditionally psychiatrists don't see it, because we know that you don't need a cortex to have memories. There are organisms without a cortex, without a brain, that have memories. Memory is a function of living matter. A number of years ago, Eric Kandel got a Nobel Prize for studying memory mechanisms in a sea slug, called *aplysia*. So a sea slug has memory, but a newborn cannot remember hours of a potentially life-threatening situation.

Then the other paradox here is that the whole psychiatric community agrees that the experiences immediately following birth—which is nursing, which is the exchange between the newborn and the mother—is all-important. Even pediatricians and obstetricians talk about bonding, the exchange of looks between the mother and the child that can influence the whole future relationship. And we have now extensive fetal research showing the sensitivity of the fetus already in the womb. For example, if you're playing Vivaldi to pregnant mothers, and then you play it again in the nursery, the children would be more relaxed, they would sleep better, they would gain more weight, and so on. There are other indications of the sensitivity of the fetus.

The only way I can understand this amazing, amazing logical gap that you see here is that it's a psychological repression, that the experienced memory is so frightening that we use our intellect to explain it away. You know, "These things wouldn't have been important because my cortex wasn't myelinated." The idea that a discipline that is so proud of its logic, its rigid logical, scientific thinking, can come up with that kind of inconsistency by attributing the ability of very refined memory to the nursing newborn, but at the same time believes that there is no way of recording something that could be 15, 30, 50 hours (several days) of a life-threatening situation, is just hard to believe.

Now you get into much more problems when you go further because you can remember early embryonic development. You can certainly experience conception on a cellular level of awareness, and you can go beyond and have ancestral memories and experiences from the collective unconscious, where it becomes increasingly difficult to find any material substrate. So we have now a concept of memory without a material substrate. Some of the things that would fit here would be, for example, Rupert Sheldrake's idea of the morphogenetic fields. The other one would be the concept of so-called *psi field* or *Akashic field* that Ervin László described, where he scientifically formulated the concept of a sub-quantum field where everything that has ever happened in the universe remains holographically recorded, and becomes available to all of us under certain special circumstances. So our consciousness research is now beyond the idea that memory has to have some kind of a material substrate, whether it's the brain or even the DNA.

TS: Well let's talk about that a moment, because it seems like that's a pretty controversial point: consciousness without a material substrate.

SG: Oh, it's definitely controversial in terms of current academic circles, but we have, for example, an enormous number of observations from thanatology showing that consciousness can operate independently of the brain. You know, people who have a near-death experience—not just their heart stops, but their brainwaves are flat, so it's a cardiac death and a brain death—when they are being resuscitated, the consciousness operates outside of the body with complete sensory access to the environment, not just in the room where it is happening, but it can travel to other parts of the building, can experience something hundreds or thousands of miles away, and if there is an open-minded researcher who goes and checks these things, he finds out that these things are happening, that they can be consensually validated. Kenrick and Bellerino, for example, show that this can happen to people who are congenitally blind—who, for organic reasons, have never seen anything before in their lives—if they are in a near-death situation, they can see, and what they see can be consensually validated. They talk about veridical out-of-body experiences.

So you know we have various observations showing that consciousness is not a product of the brain. Consciousness can really operate independently.

TS: This is such an important point to emphasize. What does this tell you about what you think, imagine, suppose will happen when you die?

SG: We can do a little more than fantasize about it, because we have these reports of people who came quite close to death. We don't have reports from people who actually died, completed the process. (There are reports from Tibetan literature, and so on.) But I have had, in my psychedelic sessions, repeated experiences where I believed that I had already died, that I was in the realm, the post-mortem realm, the *bardo* realm, and I have seen many, many other people describe that. We had patients who were dying of cancer, we were doing psychedelic research with them, and we had instances where they had the experiences of death and rebirth, having a sense of transcending death, and then, as cancer continued, they actually had a real near-death experience. One of my patients, who is described in the book *When the Impossible Happens*, his ureter was obstructed by the metastasis, and they operated on him, and he had cardiac arrest. When he came back, he told us, "I'm glad that I had these sessions with you, because the territory was not new to me." He was comparing, actually, his experiences from psychedelic sessions with the real near-death experience.

So we have many indications suggesting that what's going to be happening at the time of death is going to be quite similar to what we have experienced in psychedelic sessions, but of course, we'll never know for sure. We'll get the final answer when we'll be actually dying.

TS: Just to make sure everyone's tracking with us: When you talk about consciousness without a substrate, what you mean by a substrate is some kind of material receiver?

SG: Yeah. Something that's material, like the brain or the DNA. It would be more of something like a field. Rupert Sheldrake used to talk about a morphogenetic field, or Ervin László is talking about the Akashic field or the PSI field, which would be a sub-quantum field where everything that has ever happened would be recorded. Or maybe the field of consciousness can retain information, the field of consciousness itself. We'd like to move away from the idea that consciousness is actually produced by the brain. We have many, many indications that that's not the case. What we have is an enormous number of observations showing that there are systematic correlations between the anatomy, physiology, biochemistry of the brain and states of consciousness, but we have absolutely no proof that the brain generates consciousness. This is, again, another kind of logical jump that has happened in the academic thinking.

You know, it would be tantamount to saying that because there is a systematic relationship between the components in the television sets, their functioning, and the quality of the picture and the sound that you get, it's a proof that the program

is generated in the box. This, of course, leaves the possibility that the television set mediates the program, but doesn't generate it, in the same way that the brain mediates consciousness, but doesn't really create it.

TS: So is that your understanding of the relationship between consciousness and the brain, that the brain is a mediator?

SG: Well, what I believe is that we have a lot of evidence that consciousness is not produced by the brain. It's easier for me now to imagine, the way the Hindus do, that what we are experiencing as the material world is really virtual reality. You know, they talk about *maya*, they talk about *lila*, they talk about the divine play. I can imagine consciousness generating the experience of the material world, rather than being able to believe that something like matter—which, in our understanding, is inert, sort of blind, reactive—can generate something like consciousness. I mean the gap is so phenomenal that it's hard to imagine. And nobody has ever tried to explain how possibly matter could create consciousness. It's the basic metaphysical assumption, which sort of reflects this belief that the world is material, and therefore consciousness has to be derivative, but there is this other extreme that the Hindus have, that all we are dealing with is virtual reality, that worlds can be created by orchestration of experiences, and those people who have had psychedelic experiences—or even spontaneous experiences, or experiences in holotropic breathwork—they know that consciousness can create worlds. Very, very believable ones. Occasionally even more believable than this one. There is, of course, also the possibility of the parallelism, that both consciousness and matter are real, and that they are sort of related in a very interesting way.

Philosophically, of all three of those are possibilities: the world is material and matter generates consciousness, or the nature of the universe is absolute consciousness that has the capacity of creating worlds by orchestrating experiences, and then the parallel existence of matter and consciousness.

TS: Well, it's clear that you don't think the first option is the way things are, but between the second and the third, are you clear what your view is?

SG: I think I would side with the Eastern philosophies. You know, if I am to take all of the experiences that I've had over the years, and everything I have seen in terms of these experiences and things happening around them, like amazing synchronicities and so on, I would certainly be more inclined to give priority to consciousness.



You know, I read, years ago, a book that I saw in the bookstore. It was Francis Crick, called *The Astonishing Hypothesis*. Francis Crick was the codiscoverer of the DNA structure. It was called *The Astonishing Hypothesis: A Nobel Prize-Winning Scientist Explains Consciousness*. I said, “This is a book I have to read.” So I bought the book, and I started reading it. It began with a statement, you know, “All your joys, all your sorrows, all your ideas, all your visions: It’s nothing else but the play of the activity of the neurons in your brain,” was the astonishing hypothesis. Then Crick says, “Well, let’s simplify it. Let’s look at what happens when you observe something.” Then he says, “When you look at something, light is reflected from it. It creates electric changes, chemical changes in your retina that creates a neuronal impulse, more electric changes, more biochemical changes, and then finally, this impulse ends up in the suboccipital cortex—again, electric potentials and biochemical changes . . .” and he gives pages and pages of experiments proving that this is the case, then he leaves it in the suboccipital cortex, as electric potentials and biochemical changes, as if that explained the problem.

That’s actually where the problem begins. What is it that can create, out of these biochemical and electric changes, a reasonable facsimile of what’s out there, in colors, and sort of project it into three-dimensional space? That’s an extremely profound philosophical problem that Immanuel Kant pointed to: How do we know that what is there is really correctly reflected in our brain? We only know how the world appears to us, but not what things really are. There’s no way of getting beyond that kind of a problem.

So the Hindus have a whole other idea: that you see exactly what you’re supposed to see, but the things that you see are not there in the way you perceived them. In the same way as in the movies—you see?—you see exactly what you are expected to see, but those things are not what you perceive them as being. The horses, the trees, the people . . . it’s just the play of energy that you interpret in a certain way.

TS: Now Stan, as we’re talking today, you’re in your 80s, and you mentioned that it was some of the experiences in your personal life, some of the things that were really mind-bending, mind-expanding, mind-melting, whatever word you want to use, that convinced you of the primacy of consciousness. I’m wondering if you can share one or two examples of events that really shifted you—your experience was just undeniable, and it created some kind of shift in you.

SG: Again, I don’t think it was one or two or three experiences. It’s more the number of those things that happened. Several of them, in the book, again, *When the Impossible Happens*, for example, in a motel near the Ayers Rock, *uluru*, you

know, the cosmic mountain of the aborigines in the middle of the Australian desert, and not really knowing the aboriginal mythology, that experience took me into this realm of what they call “dreaming,” encountering the mythic figures of the aboriginal mythology, and going through a process of being born by the Great Mother Kangaroo, and so on. Then, the next day, we bought a little booklet in the motel, and took a car and drove around the mountain, and there were descriptions of many of the things that I had experienced the night before. My inner experiences were validated by this guidebook we were reading. That was just one of many, many experiences, some amazing synchronicities happening around these states.

The phenomenon of synchronicity is something that was a major turning point in Carl Gustav Jung’s work, also, because he initially saw the archetypes as being sort of hard-wired in the brain, and when he discovered synchronicity, the fact that what appears to be the material, or what we call objective reality, can enter into this kind of a playful interaction with our psyche. We can have a dream or a vision, and then the material reality presents it in 3-D. It’s quite, quite remarkable.

I have, in the book, this story that Joseph Campbell tells: When he was writing the first volume of what was supposed to be a six-volume encyclopedia of mythology, he was living at the time on the fourteenth floor of a high-rise building of lower Manhattan, and in his study, there were two sets of windows: one overlooking Sixth Avenue (not very interesting), and the other overlooking the Hudson River (a very beautiful view). These two windows were always open, and the other two windows were opened very rarely for cleaning. He was working on the Kalahari bushmen mythology where the heroic figure is the praying mantis, so he was surrounded by these pictures and these articles and the Laurens van der Post biography, where he talks about his bushman nanny interacting with the praying mantis, and suddenly he had this irresistible impulse to get up and open one of these windows that he had never regularly opened. He looked out and automatically turned his head to the side, and there, on the fourteenth floor of this high-rise building, was a big specimen of praying mantis. It climbed up and turned his/her head towards him and gave him a look, then just continued to climb up the building.

You see? Those kinds of things are quite, quite remarkable. The probability that something like this happens in chance is really . . . or the improbability is really astronomical. Besides the experiences that are more like in the category of the uluru experience, I had also lots of these synchronistic connections with my experiences.

TS: I think that lots of people—and I imagine lots of people listening—have had experiences of synchronicity that are just remarkable, and as you say, just completely implausible, but yet, “Wow! This happened!” The question, then, is: How do we interpret these and make meaningful sense of what’s actually happening in our lives from these experiences of synchronicity? Can you help us there? What does synchronicity point to, in your view?

SG: Well, first of all, they point to the fact that the universe is something completely different from what is described in monastic, materialistic science. It brings this kind of idea of the universe that is organic, that is interconnected, that it’s alive, that it’s permeated by superior intelligence, that events in the universe are orchestrated in an intelligent way. They don’t just happen. It’s a radical change in our understanding of the nature of reality, from the typical Western view that we have in industrial societies, where it’s a simply material world in which only humans are really fully conscious, to a universe that’s created by superior intelligence and that has a kind of a master blueprint behind it.

Rick Tarnas brought a whole other perspective on this by 30 years of studying history and showing the correlations between events in the world and planetary transits. It shows an image of the universe in which what is happening here, on the material level, is formed and informed by happenings on the archetypal level, which is normally invisible. The interaction on the archetypal level is systematically correlated with the planetary movements and the angular relationships that the planets are making, so you can infer, from the situation in the world of the stars, what is happening in the archetypal world, and what kind of energies you would expect here. So Rick wrote this book called *Cosmos and Psyche*. If you read that, it’s quite, quite amazing. There you don’t have just a sort of individual, isolated synchronicities, but showing a synchronistic interconnection of all of reality, that you can take part of it, which is the movements of the planets, and you can infer what would be happening in the other realms. It’s important to say that, in this kind of understanding, the stars don’t cause anything. They just indicate what is happening in the way in which our clock does not create time, but it’s just showing what time it is.

TS: Now we started our conversation, Stan, talking about your research with people undergoing LSD experiences, and you’ve mentioned that you’ve developed a method, holotropic breathwork, which is one that allows people to access these expanded states of consciousness without drugs or LSD or ingesting anything. Just to talk a little bit about that: What’s your understanding of what LSD does to our capacity to have experience? And then is that really something that can be mimicked in a non-drug approach?

SG: Well, you know, all those years working with LSD, I knew that what we were experiencing were not really LSD experiences, that LSD was like a powerful catalyst that makes available the contents from really deep levels of the psyche that are normally not available to exploration. I saw it as sort of like a telescope or a microscope: You know the microscope doesn't create the micro world. It just makes it available for observation. The telescope doesn't create new galaxies. We presume they are there, and we wouldn't see them without the telescope. Yet there was always this feeling: There was this incredibly powerful substance. Maybe that somehow participates in it.

And so it was amazing when Christina and I were in Essalen, at the Essalen Institute in Big Sur, where we did not have permission to use psychedelics, and we developed this method of holotropic breathwork where you just use faster breathing, powerful evocative music, and a certain kind of body work, that we saw essentially the same spectrum of experiences that we used to see in psychedelic sessions: People were reliving things from infancy, childhood, reliving birth, going to prenatal states, identifying with animals, plants, going into the realm of archetypal beings, having past-life experiences, having experiences of oneness with God, or oneness of nature, or oneness with the universe, and so on.

And then, when we saw that these experiences can be useful and healing and transformative, whether in use of psychedelics or the breathwork, we started applying the same strategy to experiences that people had spontaneously, and realized that there was a significant subgroup of states which are currently diagnosed as psychotic—which means manifestations of mental disease—that are actually crises of spiritual opening, where the psyche opens on a deep level in a spontaneous way, for unknown reasons. If we do not suppress it the way it's routinely done, but we encourage people to go into the experience and we work them, it turns out to be equally transformative and healing and even evolutionary to those experiences that are induced by breathwork or psychedelic substances. You can use the same extended cartography for all those three situations.

I think it's important to say that we are not studying psychedelic substances, or something fast breathing induces. We are studying the psyche, per se, always, the psyche that's infinitely larger than the academic psychology and psychiatry would describe it.

TS: I'm curious, because this is something I've never studied or understood, but what does a psychedelic substance do that opens us to what's naturally there? And then how is that possibly mimicked by breathwork and music?

SG: There are theories. There's no unanimity. There's no agreement, exactly, about the biochemical mechanism that is happening, but what you can say, in a very general sense, is that it changes the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious. Normally, we carry materials in our unconscious, on different levels, which have a very strong emotional charge, and they have a tendency to emerge into consciousness. Then there is a system, which we call the psychological defenses, that's kind of holding it down. One of the important discoveries of Freud was about this dynamic between the unconscious psyche and the conscious psyche. He described how the unconscious breaks through, not just in symptoms of psycho-neurosis, but for example in slips of the tongue, or in jokes, and so on, and then also in the form of dreams, when the psychological defenses go down—the censor, as Freud calls it, goes down—then the unconscious is more available. So psychedelics and the breathing do something similar, only in a much more powerful way than an ordinary dream would do, unless there are some really powerful, nightmare type of dreams.

We carry these contents in our psyche that have strong emotional charge—some of them very painful, from traumatic experiences, some of them that are very joyful. For example, around birth, you find a prenatal experience that, if it was a good womb, would be a very ecstatic experience. The post-natal experience, again, if there was good mothering available, would be very ecstatic, but the actual passage through the birth canal would be very painful. If these memories are strongly emotionally charged, if you change the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious, then this unconscious material would surface and become available for processing.

TS: It seems that one of the risks—at least this would be my view—in a psychedelic approach is that someone could be overwhelmed by what their defenses have been keeping at bay. Do you find that with holotropic breathwork, or does it seem that, in holotropic breathwork, the person is a little bit more in charge of how much material from their unconscious is released? And maybe you don't even think that this risk of overwhelm from psychedelics is a risk. I'm curious.

SG: You know, much depends not just the method that you're using, but on what we call set and setting. For example, the ratio between risk and benefit in psychedelic sessions is critically determined by who does it, for what purposes, in what kind of circumstances—physical and human circumstances. It makes a big difference what the set and the setting is, and you have an extremely broad range there in which psychedelics have been used, from the therapeutic situations where they have been used for artistic purposes or for scientific insight, all the

way to attempts to use it as a chemical weapon or as a method of discrediting foreign diplomats or military leaders. Even under the best of circumstances, it will not be absolutely safe. A significant factor, also, is the personality of the person who takes it. Some people are so close to breakdown that it could happen tomorrow or a week from now spontaneously. The psychedelics can be just the last straw, and if it's under very bad circumstances, then it could really lead to a breakdown. The worst thing is if, in the situation now, people get tranquilizers in the middle of a bad trip. That sort of freezes it in the bad place, and then the person gets maintenance dosages to make sure that the gestalt will never complete itself. Those are all factors that contribute to the fact that people can be damaged by psychedelics.

Now, in the breathwork, you start in a safe situation. Everybody has a partner. We work in diets, and then we have trained facilitators for about eight or 10 people, usually myself and senior staff members are there for the whole group. People are asked to do the whole thing with their eyes closed, which already makes it safer, because you're already fully aware of what is coming up, and you have the best opportunity to work with it. If people take it walking around or in a rave, you know, in an open situation where they don't really pay any attention, their psychological defenses go down, but they don't pay attention to the material that's coming up—those are situations that are very, very conducive to bad results. But in the breathwork, we start and end in a completely introjected kind of situation where people have their eyes closed and even have eye shades, where there is a very complex human support system. If something gets bad results, we have a certain kind of bodywork and emotional work that can help the integration.

TS: I know you've now just published a new book on holotropic breathwork with SUNY Press, *Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-Exploration and Therapy*. I'm curious what your vision is for holotropic breathwork in the world over the next decade or two. What would you love to see happen?

SG: Well, we feel that it's a very powerful way of self-exploration and therapy that has a much better chance to influence, somehow, what's happening in the culture than verbal therapy, which is conducted on a one-to-one basis. There is an additional element in the breathwork: When people function as what we call "sitters"—they alternate in these roles—many of them get so interested in this that they actually get into the training. There's almost like a chain reaction there, so we feel like it could really influence quite a few people if that method becomes popular.

The most exciting thing that we have seen is that, besides the emotional and psychosomatic healing that happens, people who do this systematically and responsibly actually experience a profound transformation of their worldview. For example, their level of aggression is lowered because they work through a lot of their aggression in the material that is emerging. They develop a sense of compassion, a sense of belonging. You don't have to teach people ecology when they have transpersonal experiences of oneness with nature and with other species and with other people. They realize that sense of underlying unity in nature and they approach the ecological problems in a completely different way. They realize that we are all interconnected with nature, and that we cannot damage nature without simultaneously damaging ourselves. They also start developing a deep tolerance in terms of gender, race, culture, ideology, religious differences. They start seeing these differences more as interesting, as indications of the infinite creativity of the cosmic creative principle, rather than something that you would like to eliminate. They develop spirituality which is non-denominational, that transcends the adherence to a particular organized religion which tends to unite people who are relating to the same kind of images of the divine or concept of the divine, but at the same time divide the world, because it sets that group against other groups: "We are Christians; you are pagans," "We are Muslims; you are Christians," "We are Hindus; you are Sikhs," and so on, differences that are enough to end in bloodshed. Even small differences within the same faith, like the Protestants and the Catholics, or the Shiites and the Sunis, the differences are enough for killing the other group. This is not the kind of religion that we need in the world. But people who do some systematic inner work with what I call holotropic states then develop a spirituality that's universal, that's all encompassing. That I find very, very hopeful.

I can see a future religion where you would offer people, first of all, you would value spirituality as an important dimension in human life, and important part of human existence. You would give people some means through which they could have personal experiences. You could provide support for them, but you would have absolutely no investment whether their experiences would be using Buddhist imagery, or Hindu imagery, or if they would go in the direction of ancient Egypt or Australian aborigines. You would honor it as just different manifestations of one source, which transcends them all. I think that kind of spirituality might be the only way out of this crisis in which we are now, where the world is so profoundly, so painfully divided in many different ways.

TS: Now this term, I realize we didn't define it: holotropic. This is not exactly the same as non-ordinary states of consciousness. You coined the term holotropic?

SG: Yes, I did. I became interested in a significant sub-group of non-ordinary states which are healing, which are transformative, even evolutionary, and which have what we can call *heuristic* potential, which is we can learn new things about consciousness, about psyche, and even the nature of reality. Those are the experiences that, for example, shamans experience during their initiatory crisis; or that they induce in their clients; or experiences that the initiates have in the rites of passage of different native cultures; or the experiences that the initiates had in the ancient death-rebirth mysteries; the experiences of the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Christian mystics, the Taoist, the Kabbalist, and so on. I became so astounded that psychiatry does not have a name for this important sub-category. We have just that one term, altered states, which describes everything from delirium tremens or hallucinations during typhoid fever to a true mystical experience. We don't have a distinction of a spiritual, mystic experience and a psychotic experience. So every non-ordinary state would be seen as pathological and would be called "altered." I don't like that term for this important sub-group. Even that term, non-ordinary, seems too broad, because it would include many states which are different from ordinary consciousness, but don't have those kinds of positive qualities that I have described.

So I started to call them holotropic. *Holos* means "whole," and *tropain* means "moving toward" or "in the direction of" something. Like in the term *heliotropism*, the plant has the ability to always follow the sun or orient itself toward the sun. So it means "moving toward wholeness," which of course suggests something that would surprise the average person in the industrial society, which suggests that we somehow are not whole in the way we experience ourselves in our everyday life. To explain that, I usually refer to the kind of a Hindu shorthand. In the Hindu religion, they would tell you you are not *namarupa*, you are not name and form, you are not the body ego. You carry within yourself a kind of a divine core or divine spark, and they give you methods in which you can get empirical, experiential validation of that. You can actually experience identification with that core. They call it *atman*, and if you experience it, you realize that that energy and that state of consciousness is identical with that core, with the energy or the state of consciousness of the creative principle itself, *brahma*.

These holotropic states take us from our ordinary identity, the body ego, all the way to this experience with the cosmic source, sometimes in small steps, sometimes in major jumps, major breaks. So that's the meaning of that term, holotropic. We can kind of reclaim our cosmic status, if you want.

TS: Well, I feel like, in this conversation, we've explored a first layer of, as you mentioned, four or five decades of your work, which has really made such a



contribution to our collective understanding. The final question I have for you, Stan, is: Here you've made such a tremendous contribution, helping bring attention to transpersonal levels of understanding, the perinatal dimension of our experience. Do you feel a sense of fulfillment?

SG: I have a sense that I have had a very interesting life, and the experiences themselves were kind of self-validating. Obviously I would love to have more time, but I also have this sense that maybe there will be more time, you know, if that concept of reincarnation turns out to be true. I don't have any regrets. Whether what we have discovered will be accepted by the culture, whether it's going to be actually useful, that's not up to me. That's on the circumstances in other people, too, to decide. Obviously, if I could do it again, there are things that I would do differently, but I think that everything considered was done within what was my capacities at the time.

TS: It seems to me, Stan, that you're a pioneer, and it's simply a matter of time before the culture meets you. That would be my view.

Well, Stan, thank you so much for this conversation.

SG: Thank you. It's been a great pleasure, as always, to talk to you. Thank you so much for having me.

TS: And, as I mentioned to our listeners, I really believe that we've barely skimmed the surface. Stan Grof is the author of a new book on Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Self-Exploration and Therapy, as well as a book from Sounds True called When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities, in which Stan tells many stories from his personal life, and then also a very deep and rich six-CD series on The Transpersonal Vision, which covers a lot of the theory that we touched upon today on the healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness. [Soundstrue.com](http://Soundstrue.com). Many voices, one journey.  
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