

Across The Universe



Stanislov Grof

On Nonordinary States Of Consciousness

ANGELA WINTER

I NEVER intended to interview Stanislov Grof. I had ordered some books from Colorado-based publisher Sounds True, and when the package arrived, I found the company's senior publicist had also enclosed a copy of Grof's memoir, *When the Impossible Happens: Adventures in Non-Ordinary Realities*, which she said was one of her favorites. I recognized Grof's name from my university studies. He is one of the founders and principal theoreticians of transpersonal psychology, a discipline that integrates traditional Western psychology with spiritual principles.

Grof was born in 1931 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where he went on to receive an MD from Charles University and a PhD in philosophy of medicine from the Czechoslovakian Academy of Sciences. While he was a psychiatric resident, his research lab received a box of LSD ampules from Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland. Grof was fascinated by the possibilities the new substance offered for psychiatry and psychology, and psychedelics and nonordinary states of consciousness soon became the focus of his work. From 1960 to 1967 Grof served as principal investigator in a psychedelic-research program at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague. He then moved to Baltimore, Maryland, to serve as a clinical and research fellow at Johns Hopkins University. Later he became chief of psychiatric research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, where he headed one of the last official psychedelic studies in the United States.

By the early 1970s, funding and permission for psychedelic research had largely ceased, for administrative and political reasons, and Grof shifted his focus to writing. In 1973 he was invited to serve as scholar-in-residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, where he conducted seminars and wrote until 1987. During this time he and his wife, Christina, developed "holotropic breathwork," a drug-free method of exploring nonordinary states of consciousness. The technique uses a combination of accelerated breathing and evocative music to help participants enter nonordinary states, which, Grof asserts, activate their natural healing intelligence. Holotropic breathwork is typically done in groups, and participants work in pairs, alternating between the roles of the "breather" and the "sitter," who assists the breather. The Grofs have conducted sessions using this technique with more than thirty-five thousand people in the U.S., Asia, Europe, South America, and Australia and have trained and certified more than a thousand breathwork facilitators.

Grof currently lives in Mill Valley, California, and serves as distinguished adjunct professor of psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. He has published more than 150 academic papers and is the author of twenty books, including *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*; *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research*; *The Cosmic Game: Exploration of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness* (all State University of New York Press); and *LSD: Doorway to the Numinous* (Park Street Press). He is also the founder and president of the International Transpersonal Association.

After reading *When the Impossible Happens*, Grof's personal account of his fifty years of exploring nonordinary realms, I contacted him to request an interview, and we arranged to meet at a hotel near the San Francisco airport, where he was leading an introductory holotropic-breathwork workshop. We found a small table in an alcove of the lobby, and the indefatigable Grof spoke with me for nearly three hours, his voice melodious and measured. At the end of the conversation, I told him that I'd decided to participate in the workshop the next day.

I arrived for the morning workshop unsure of what to expect — and, frankly, a little apprehensive. Would the experience be akin to tripping on LSD, and if so, why would I want to do that in an airport-hotel ballroom with strangers watching? I made my way to the spot my friend and breathing partner, Bruno, had staked out for us, and he and I made a nest of the sleeping bag, blankets, and pillows we'd brought. My partner wanted to breathe first, and I was glad to ease my way into the experience by being the sitter. Bruno reclined on the sleeping bag, eyes closed, as Grof led the breathers through a brief relaxation exercise and then instructed them to find their own natural breathing rhythm, let it deepen, and connect the inhalation with the exhalation, creating a "circle of breath." As Grof spoke, one of the twenty trained facilitators assisting him started some recorded music. After the breathing instruction had ended, they cranked the volume to rock-concert level. (Grof had explained that the music would be loud, both to encourage an emotional response and to mask the sounds made by other breathers.)

As the music's tempo increased and the beats became tribal, some of the breathers entered what seemed to be a trance state. A woman beside us began to make intricate arm movements, her eyes rolled back in her head. Bruno was sweating profusely, his

hands curled into hard, tight fists. I heard groans, screams, and what sounded like the wail of an infant coming from a nearby woman in her sixties. Grof sat alone at the head of the room as the facilitators supported the pairs of partners. Every now and then he'd tour the room, like a psychiatrist emeritus making rounds. I became accustomed to seeing his champagne-colored dress socks in my peripheral vision whenever he walked by.

Near the end of the breathing session, Bruno reported feeling tension in the area around his sacrum, where the spinal column meets the pelvis. Grof offered to help release it, and Bruno accepted. When Bruno began to experience nausea, Grof motioned for me to make ready the plastic bag given to sitters. (We'd been told that vomiting is one of the possible outcomes of a breathwork session.) And my partner did throw up as Grof pressed on his sacrum, back, and diaphragm. Though I was distressed, Grof showed no revulsion or hesitation. When the session was over, I helped my partner rise; his muscles had cramped so intensely that he could barely walk. We went outside and sat in the sun, and he told me he was glad he'd had the experience, despite the muscle pain and vomiting, because he'd been able to release difficult emotions that he'd held in for some time.

Next it was my turn as breather. I was nervous lying on the sleeping bag as Grof led us through the relaxation exercise and breathing instruction. My breathing felt artificial and forced at first, but I tried to relax and focus instead on sensations in my body, the first of which was a prickly, buzzing feeling in my hands. My fingers soon clenched into tight, painful fists. Worried this would continue for hours, I breathed through the pain until I felt an unusual rippling sensation under my arms. Then I felt as if my body were being tugged upward off the floor and through the air, and suddenly my consciousness inhabited the body of a red-tailed hawk soaring over the ocean. With each beat of my wings I felt my sinew and bone moving delicately and powerfully. I saw minute details at a vast distance. At the same time I could still feel my body on the floor of the hotel ballroom, where my breathing had shifted into an easy rhythm and my hands had relaxed. I reveled in the freedom of flight at the beginning of my journey into the nonordinary.

Winter: What led you to study medicine and psychiatry?

Grof: I didn't discover my interests until my late teens. My original plan was to be involved in animated movies, and as I was finishing high school, I already had an interview at the film studios in Prague. Just before I made the final commitment, however, a friend came to visit me holding a book he was excited about. It was Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.

Freud was not well-known in Czechoslovakia at that time. During the Nazi era all psychoanalytic books had been banned.



STANISLAV GROF

After the war the nation experienced three years of freedom, during which the books slowly came back to the libraries, but then the Communists came, and Freud was again on the blacklist. All I knew about Freud was what they'd told us in philosophy classes: that he was a "pansexualist" who tried to explain everything people do as repressed sexuality. I took the book and started reading it that evening. I was so fascinated that I couldn't go to sleep. I read through the night, and within two days I had decided to become a psychoanalyst.

So I enrolled in medical school and joined a small group headed by the only Czech psychoanalyst who'd survived the war. (Most of the psychoanalysts were Jewish, and they'd either ended up in concentration camps or managed

to escape to the West.) We read psychoanalytic books and discussed case histories. I also was in analysis three times a week for seven years, for training purposes.

Winter: What led you away from orthodox Freudian analysis?

Grof: The first problem was that in Communist Czechoslovakia it was dangerous to be labeled an analyst. My own sessions had to be arranged in secret. Then, when I became a psychiatric resident and got more acquainted with actual case histories, I started having second thoughts. I was still excited by psychoanalytic theory, but I also realized its practical limitations. A patient had to meet very specific criteria to be considered a good candidate for psychoanalysis, the treatment lasted years, and the results were not exactly breathtaking. An analyst could expect to treat only eighty or so patients in a lifetime. I started to think I should have stayed with animated movies.

And then an amazing thing happened: We had just finished a study of Mellaril, one of the early tranquilizers. Sandoz, the Swiss pharmaceutical company that produced Mellaril, sent us a box full of ampules. The letter that came with it said the substance was LSD-25, and it had extremely powerful "psychoactive" properties, which later became known as "psychedelic." The psychedelic effect was already familiar to researchers through substances such as mescaline, the alkaloid of the peyote plant, which is a sacrament in the Native American Church and has been used for centuries in Mesoamerica. It was the incredible efficacy of LSD that was exciting: you had to take maybe a hundred milligrams of mescaline to have a decent experience, but with LSD you had to take only a hundred *micrograms* — a thousand times less. If such a small dose could so greatly affect the consciousness, perhaps what we called mental "diseases" were really aberrations of body chemistry. And if we could somehow identify the chemical culprit and neutralize it, we would have a cure for psychosis, particularly schizophrenia. This, of course, would be the Holy Grail of psychiatry.

LSD could be used to produce experimental psychosis, allowing us to administer it to "normal" people and study the biochemical changes in their bodies and the electrical activ-

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ity in their brains using EEGs — before, during, and after the experience — to see what was happening biologically while the mental function was so deeply affected. We wanted to see if LSD, psilocybin (the pure alkaloid from hallucinogenic mushrooms), and mescaline produced, by and large, the same effect, and then compare this with what was happening in schizophrenic or psychotic patients.

The manufacturers at Sandoz also suggested that we could take LSD ourselves to experience the world in which our patients lived and perhaps understand them better, which might help us to be more successful in treating them. This suggestion became my destiny, or karma, if you will. I was already in crisis over psychoanalysis, and this seemed like an interesting new avenue. I became one of the early volunteers, and I had an extremely powerful experience that changed me profoundly, both professionally and personally.

The research protocol was a combination of LSD and exposure to a powerful stroboscopic light of various frequencies to study the effects of LSD on what is called “driving” or “entraining” the brain waves. When my experience was culminating, the research assistant took me to a small room for my EEG and put the electrodes on my scalp. I lay down and closed my eyes, and then she turned on a strobe. There was an incredible light, more powerful than anything I had ever seen in my life. At the time I thought it must have been what it was like to see the atomic bomb fall on Hiroshima. Today I think it was more like the “primary clear light,” or *dharmakaya*, which the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* says we are supposed to see at the time of our death.

What happened next was my consciousness catapulted out of my body. I lost the research assistant, I lost the clinic, I lost Prague, I lost the planet. I had the feeling that my consciousness had no boundaries anymore, and I had become the totality of existence. A little later I returned to the physical universe, but in some strange way I did not just see it; I actually *became* the universe. Then the research assistant

turned off the strobe, and my consciousness shrank again. I connected with the planet, I found Prague, I found the clinic, and I found my body, although for quite a while my body and my consciousness were separate, and I had difficulty aligning them, bringing them together. It became clear to me that consciousness is not a product of the neurophysiological processes in the brain, as I had been taught at the university, but something much higher, possibly superordinate to matter. The idea that consciousness somehow mysteriously emerges from matter didn't make sense to me anymore. It was easier to imagine that consciousness could create the experience of the material universe by an infinitely complex orchestration. I was suddenly in the realm of the Eastern philosophies, where consciousness is a primary attribute of existence and cannot be reduced to anything else.

Winter: Your upbringing wasn't particularly religious. Was that realization a difficult shift for you at the time?

Grof: Well, there was a complex history with religion in my family. When my parents fell in love and wanted to get married, there was a problem, because my father's family had no church affiliation and my mother's family was strictly Catholic. The Catholic church in the small Czech town where they lived refused to marry them because my father was a “pagan.” It wasn't until my grandparents made a major financial donation to the church that they were willing to relax their rules. My parents were so disenchanted by the whole affair that they didn't commit my brother and me to any religion. They said we should make our own choice when we came of age.

From this background I went to medical school, which certainly does not cultivate mystical awareness. And Czechoslovakia had at that time a Marxist regime, so we were fed the purest materialist doctrine you can get. The message was “There is nothing mysterious about the universe; see how much we have discovered already. And, if we persist, we will eventually understand it all and control it all.” We were taught that in the universe matter is primary, and life, consciousness, and intelligence are its byproducts, epiphenomena. So I'm a strange example of somebody who was brought to spirituality and mysticism through laboratory and clinical work.

Winter: What were the results of that initial LSD study?

Grof: We found that when we gave LSD or another psychedelic substance in the same dosage under the same circumstances to a number of people, each of them had a completely different experience. Even if the same person took the same substance multiple times, each of the sessions would be different. So we were not dealing with a predictable pharmacological effect. If you have no idea what might happen when you give someone a substance, that is the end of its use as a traditional pharmacological agent.

But in the course of this research it became clear that LSD was opening access to deep levels of the unconscious. So I dropped the experimental-psychosis approach and took LSD into clinical studies.

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