

Book review: *Holotropic Breathwork: A New Approach to Therapy and Self-Exploration*. Grof, Stanislav, M.D., Ph.D. and Grof, Christina, Ph.D.h.c. State University of New York Press, 2010. Review by Renn Butler.

Embracing the Beyond Within Birth and Transcendence in the New Psychology

“We are not human beings having spiritual experiences, we are spiritual beings having human experiences.” Teilhard de Chardin, 1975

The long-awaited volume by Stanislav and Christina Grof is the first comprehensive text on the theory and practice of their new strategy of psychotherapy and self-exploration. Cowritten by this remarkable husband-wife partnership and supported by over eighty combined years of research into non-ordinary or *holotropic* states of consciousness—from *holos*=wholeness, and *trepein*=moving toward—this is sure to be a cherished addition to the libraries of intelligent seekers around the world and one of the most influential books of the decade.

Grof and Grof begin by reviewing the history of Western depth psychology through the evolution of the humanistic school, the birth of transpersonal psychology in 1969, and the development of Holotropic Breathwork in the late 1970s. For readers unfamiliar with the Holotropic Breathwork, it is a powerful technique of deeper and faster breathing with evocative music that enables participants to enter non-ordinary or holotropic states of consciousness. A special type of releasing bodywork and mandala drawing help resolve unfinished tensions and integrate the experiences into everyday life. Supportive and nourishing physical contact can also be used in an appropriate way to heal unmet needs for human contact during infancy and childhood.

Employing the intrinsic healing power of the breath, Holotropic Breathwork follows in the tradition of the various “technologies of the sacred” developed over millennia in non-Western and preindustrial cultures for entering holotropic states. These include various breathing maneuvers, rhythmic drumming, trance dancing, sleep deprivation, fasting,

meditation, and the ingestion of psychoactive substances. Known from the traditions of shamanism, aboriginal rites of passage, and the ancient mystery religions, procedures for inducing holotropic states have also been developed by different schools of yoga, Theravada, Mahayana, Zen, and Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, Sufism, and mystical Christianity. The Grofs describe how Western civilization “encountered holotropic states on a mass scale during the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s but, unfortunately, the irresponsible and chaotic nature of this movement obscured the enormous positive value” of these experiences.

When people enter holotropic states of consciousness of whatever origin, they encounter three broad territories of the psyche. The first layer is referred to as the *biographical*. This layer contains leftover energies and emotions from unresolved experiences in the lifetime, from infancy to the present. As well as the traumas known from traditional psychotherapy, the Grofs observed that their clients automatically worked through leftover traces from serious illnesses, accidents, and injuries, especially those that posed a threat to life or breathing.

When self-exploration continues, the next layer of the psyche that individuals encounter is called the *perinatal*, from *peri*=surrounding, and *natalis*=birth. Perinatal experiences include specific detailed experiences from the various stages of birth, from the amniotic unity between mother and fetus, to the agonizing suffering inside the contracting uterine walls and birth canal, to the explosive liberation of birth and the beginning of separate biological existence. The Grofs observed interestingly that, as people relive their birth, they are at the same time facing and consuming their fear of death, essentially dying as a separate entity and reconnecting with the divine source. It is no accident that “birth” and “rebirth” are similarly named, as they are so deeply connected in the psyche.

The deepest layers of experiences that people encounter are termed *transpersonal*. These include vivid ancestral, racial, collective, karmic, and phylogenetic memories. Individuals can also experience the consciousness of specific animals, plants, or inorganic materials and processes. In holotropic states, they can also have spontaneous contact with archetypal and mythological sequences from any culture in the world, even those of which they have no prior knowledge. The ultimate experiences seem to be confrontation or identification with the cosmic creative principle or Universal Mind itself.

What distinguishes the new psychology from its predecessors are two important additions: one is the movement from exclusively verbal strategies of “talking therapy” to the direct expression of emotions. The other is the reintegration of the spiritual dimensions of the psyche. Building on the work of C. G. Jung—considered the first transpersonal psychologist—this new approach recognizes the existence of a higher cosmic consciousness (Jung’s *anima mundi*) and the meta-healing value of reopening the psyche toward it. The spiritual quest is recognized as a legitimate and important aspect of life. At the same time, modern consciousness research emphasizes a clear distinction between genuine spirituality based on personal experience, which has a universal, non-denominational and all-inclusive character, and the dogmas of organized religions which all too often seem to foster sectarian chauvinism, extremism, and fundamentalism.

Grof and Grof discuss the various therapeutic mechanisms operating in Holotropic Breathwork, some of which represent an intensification of conventional therapeutic mechanisms while others are unique to the new experiential approach. They describe surprising results in the healing of emotional and psychosomatic disorders, favorable effects on physical diseases, including some that current medical theory considers to be organic, as well as positive changes in personality, worldview, life strategy, and hierarchy of values.

In contrast with the astonishing diversity of competing psychological theories and schools, with their widely different strategies and approaches, holotropic breathing seems to function as an *integral approach* to self-exploration and therapy. In these states, something like the psyche’s own “inner healer” selects the most relevant material and brings it into consciousness for processing. The facilitators function as trained “co-adventurers” who intelligently support what is already trying to happen. The basic allopathic strategies of traditional psychotherapy routinely suppress symptoms without treating their underlying causes, which resembles a mechanic disconnecting the warning light in a person’s car and then telling them to get back on the road. In contrast, holotropic states of consciousness function as a kind of “universal homeopathic remedy.” Symptoms are recognized as the partial emergence of a spontaneous healing process. Facilitators support the direction that the psyche itself is already trying to move, which is observed over time to be intrinsically healing.

The Grofs make a special appeal to service providers, writing that, although the changes in theory and practice introduced into psychiatry by the research of holotropic states

are radical and challenging, “those who are able to accept them and apply them...will be able to benefit greatly from this far-reaching conceptual reorientation. They will gain a deeper understanding of the nature and dynamics of emotional and psychosomatic disorders— phobias, depression, suicidal tendencies, sexual dysfunctions and deviations, psychogenic asthma, and many others—by recognizing their perinatal and transpersonal roots. They will also be able to obtain better and faster therapeutic results by engaging therapeutic mechanisms that become available on these deeper levels of the unconscious (Grof 1985, 2000).”

At the heart of the book are six or seven vivid case studies of individuals who participated in the breathwork, successfully working through traumatic repressed events in their childhoods. These include life in the shadow of an authoritarian controlling father, unresolved pain from serious accidents and an undiagnosed fracture, and torturous physical and sexual abuse. Several of the most poignant are accounts by two First Nations women—one in America, the other Australia—who relived previously unknown episodes in the lives of specific ancestors, and were subsequently able to verify the authenticity of their experiences by consulting historical records. These sessions reveal a dramatic potential for the healing of cultural wounds and resolution of historical conflicts.

In a series of humorous anecdotes, the Grofs recount unique adventures and logistical mishaps from their decades of conducting workshops around the world. These include being forced to deal with restrictive cultural taboos in 1980s India, competing with an exhibition of Doberman Pinschers at an overbooked U.S. conference center, enduring the plaintive sound of oinking piglets adjacent to a dreary, rural German facility, and an encounter with the military junta in Buenos Aires. In that instance, improperly-notified soldiers, hearing emotional outcries from the hotel seminar room, kicked the door open and burst in with submachine guns ready. It took more than ten minutes for the workshop organizer to adequately explain what was happening and the soldiers to reluctantly leave. Amazingly, because the workshop participants were lying on their backs listening to evocative music with eyes closed, nobody realized what had transpired until later.

In a special section, the Grofs review the biochemical and physiological changes in the body during deep and rapid breathing. Decades of clinical research with therapeutic breathing have clearly dispelled the erroneous view in psychiatry regarding what was called the “hyperventilation syndrome.” Rather than causing a standard physiological reaction, the

experiences in Holotropic Breathwork sessions “are highly individual and cover a very wide range. They do not represent a stereotypical reaction to faster breathing as one reads in the handbooks of respiratory physiology, but reflect the psychosomatic history of the breather. In a group of people who have all had the same theoretical preparation, received the same instructions, and listened to the same music, each person will have his or her own highly specific and personally relevant experience.... We have now conducted over thirty-five thousand holotropic breathing sessions and have found the current medical understanding of the effects of faster breathing to be incorrect.”

The Grofs complete their exceptionally rich and thorough volume with a discussion of the current global crisis, key elements of which, such as insatiable greed and aggression, have deep roots in the human psyche. They suggest that the common denominator of many aspects of this crisis is the level of consciousness evolution of humanity. As discouraging as this realization may seem, at first, its converse insight is that the negative and problematic emotions can be worked through and consumed in holotropic states. The systematic processing of unconscious material—from the biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal layers of the psyche—has important implications that reach beyond the healing of emotional and psychosomatic disorders for the individuals who do the inner work. This transformation involves a “significant reduction of aggression and development of racial, gender, cultural, and ideological tolerance and compassion, ecological sensitivity, and sense of planetary citizenship.... These changes are beneficial not only for the individuals involved, but also for human society at large.” The Grofs suggest that if the observed healing and transformations in basic values could occur on a large enough scale, they might increase the chances of humanity to survive its serious escalating challenges.

In conclusion, I deeply recommend this book to anyone interested in emotional and psychosomatic healing, self-exploration, depth psychology, spirituality, comparative religions, or the relationship between consciousness and the global crisis. It represents the distilled life work of two of the most pioneering and hard-working visionaries on the planet. The Grofs have paid their dues with decades of caring service. More than a permanent addition to the canon of psychological and spiritual literature, this book is a testament to the enduring creative potency of loving partnership.

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