

Stanislav Grof on Non-Ordinary Consciousness

Interviewed by Steve Paulson, introduction by Jim Fleming

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Jim Fleming: Can you imagine intentionally triggering a psychotic state of mind? Believe it or not, some psychiatrists have done this to try to understand mental illnesses, like Schizophrenia. And one of their tools, at least some years back, was the powerful hallucinogen LSD. They not only gave the drug to their test subjects, they often took a it themselves, at least before federal authorities cracked down on this kind of research Stanislav Grof was one of the early pioneers in the study of LSD. And since then, he's devoted his life to exploring non-ordinary states of consciousness. Grof recently stopped by our studio to talk with Steve Paulson.

Steve Paulson: You've said that your life changed dramatically one day in 1956 the first time you took LSD. What happened then?

Stanislav Grof: Well, I was working at the executive department of the school of medicine in Prague, and one day we got a box of ampoules. We opened it and it said "LSD-25" This supply came from Sandoz, and they said would you work with this substance? We feel that maybe there is some use for it in psychiatry and psychology.

Paulson: So the idea then was the use would be for therapeutic purposes?

Grof: The main focus was experimental psychosis. When he gave it to these people, it seemed that the experiences that they were having were very similar to what you see naturally occurring psychosis. If this is the case, then what we call mental diseases might not be mental diseases at all. They would be kind of aberrations of body chemistry, and you would have something that would be holy grail in psychiatry, which means a test tube solution for schizophrenia and other psychoses.

Paulson: So here you were a young psychiatrist, the shipment of LSD just arrived at your lab in Prague. You decided to take some?

Grof: Well, I became you know, one of the early volunteers, and that's where I had an experience that was, in a few hours, really changed me personally and sent me professionally in a completely new direction.

Paulson: What happened during that first experience?

Grof: Well, my preceptor was very interested in electroencephalography, which means exposing people to a stroboscopic light. So between the third and fourth hour, when my experience with LSD was culminating, which was powerful enough, this research assistant came and said this was time for the experiment. So she took me into a small room. I laid down. She put the electrodes on my head and then asked me to close my eyes, and then took this gigantic strobe, you know, put it by my head and turned this thing on.

Paulson: So you had a strobe light-

Grof: A strobe light on top of me.

Paulson: (laughs) on top of the LSD.

Grof: And suddenly there was light like I had never seen in my life. I couldn't even imagine existed, like when you read about the mystical experiences, like millions of suns. At the time, I thought this must have been like in Hiroshima when the bomb went off. Today, I think it was more like, what's it called, [sic] in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, that primary clear light that you see at the moment of your death. But what happened, my consciousness was catapulted out of my body. I lost, the research assistant, the clinic, Prague, the planet, and suddenly I had the feeling I became nothing. My old self was extinguished, but I had the feeling I became all of existence. And I understood that what they taught me in the medical school about consciousness is somehow coming out of the complexity of the neurophysical processes in the brain simply was not true, that consciousness was something much, much larger, kind of a cosmic matrix, or it's kind of teased out of it.

Paulson: Now what had been your orientation, your scientific orientation, before that experience? Did you have sort of a more conventional materialistic understanding of science?

Grof: Well, I, you know, I grew up in a family that had no religious affiliation. From this kind of background, I went to medical school at a time where we were controlled by the Soviet Union, so we got the purest materialistic doctrine that you can have.

Paulson: So you were basically, you were an atheist at that time.

Grof: I was an atheist, convinced, you know. I thought I had a scientific worldview, that the history of the universe is the history of matter, and somehow life, consciousness, intelligence is something that happened as a kind of fluke in an insignificant part of the universe that has, you know, billions of galaxies.

Paulson: So then you had this, quite literally, this mind blowing experience which, you say changed your life. I mean, changed-

Grof: I mean, I have somewhat unusual case of somebody who was brought to mysticism, not to religion, but to mysticism, to spirituality, by scientific research, like laboratory and clinical research. Usually it's the other way around. People get very intense religious indoctrination, and then they discover materialistic science. They tend to play this whole thing as nonsense, nonscientific, you know, primitive magical thinking. I am a scientist. I am a rational person. And they tend to reject anything related not just to religion but to spirituality.

Paulson: So, what happened, then, in your career after that? It sounds like you entirely switched tracks.

Grof: Well, I joined a group of scientist who were both sort of psychologists, psychiatrists and biochemists who had access to psychedelics, and for the first two years, we pursued the experimental psychosis idea, which means we had a group of about 40 people including ourselves who came to the research institute and then get on of psychedelics that we had, LSD, then we had Sylosibine. We had Mescaline from Germany.

Paulson: Was all this legal to do at the time?

Grof: Legal. It was legal, yeah. We were drawing blood, you know. Every hour on the hour we were collecting samples of urine, we were doing electrophysiological experimentation, you know, very scientific. And during this time, something started dawning on me. Each of the experimental person had a very different kind of experience. Unbelievable range of experiences, so I realized this was not an ordinary pharmicon, and then also if we had the same substance repeatedly, each session was different. And at a certain point, I realized we are actually working with a catalyst. We are not having LSD experiences or psilocybin experiences, we are having experiences of ourselves.

Paulson: It would seem that the psychedelic, whether LSD or Sylosibine was triggering something inside your head.

Grof: Yeah, but it was clear that this was bringing something from the depths of the unconscious, which was there anyway. So I started seeing something like LSD like a microscope or a telescope, like a tool that makes it possible for you to study phenomena which were real but were not available without using that, so the LSD became, for me, like a tool to explore the psyche. I went back to psychoanalysis, but now sort of LSD assisted, or psychedelic assisted psychoanalysis, and that was the beginning of a whole, whole other era.

Paulson: How many sessions do you figure you sat in on?

Grof: Personally, over 4000 academic sessions.

Paulson: Over 4000?

Grof: Yeah.

Paulson: Has anyone else witnessed so many psychedelic sessions.

Grof: Not in the academic circle, but I know there are many other people who are doing it outside of the official.

Paulson: (laughs) Yeah. And to put this into perspective then, I mean this was all before Timothy Leery and Richard Albert did their famous, infamous studies, that is, at Harvard.

Grof: Yeah. Well, you know, Tim Leery had his first session in 65, where the sessions I described was, like, 56, almost ten years. Before, LSD was very respectable.

Paulson: So what you've described so far is your, the early part of your career, starting out as a psychiatrist, using the techniques of psychoanalysis, working in clinical settings, trying to help people sort out some of their personal issues at some point, maybe from the very beginning, I don't know, you became very interested in what's been called non-ordinary states of consciousness. Obviously we're talking about some of these now.

Grof: Well that was actually my first session was an ordinary state, and-

Paulson: Right.

Grof: So I think the most important part of my work, then, became mapping the psyche, because I came with this very narrow model of psychoanalysis, which is basically limited to destroy the individual

unconscious. Then you have this whole area of the Jungian archetypal collective unconscious where we can experience mythology of other cultures that we have never studied in this lifetime. So that's, there we really get to the problem of, you know, where does that come from?

Paulson: And when you start talking about Carl Jung and his notion of the collective unconscious. I mean, which has been a tremendously powerful idea for the last century, I think a lot of people would say fascinating, but you've left science. Are you still in the scientific realm here when you talk about this kind of thing?

Grof: Well I believe you are in the scientific realm, but science isn't there yet. I mean, the mysterious science is not there, the certain experiences that the current conceptual framework cannot explain, but that doesn't mean that those experiences don't exist.

Fleming: Stanislav Grof is one of the founders of transpersonal psychology. His books include "When the Impossible Happens" and "LSD: Doorway to the Numinous". If you'd like to hear more, you'll find Steve's complete uncut interview with Grof on our website at TTBook.org/meetyourmind

Voice: Another state of consciousness