

CHAPTER ONE



Healing and Heuristic Potential of Nonordinary States of Consciousness

This book summarizes my experiences and observations from more than forty years of research of nonordinary states of consciousness. My primary interest is to focus on the heuristic aspects of these states; that is, on what they can contribute to our understanding of the nature of consciousness and of the human psyche. Since my original training was as clinical psychiatrist, I will also pay special attention to the healing, transformative, and evolutionary potential of these experiences. For this purpose, the term *nonordinary states of consciousness* is too broad and general. It includes a wide range of conditions that are of little or no interest from a heuristic or therapeutic perspective.

Consciousness can be profoundly changed by a variety of pathological processes—by cerebral traumas, by intoxications with poisonous chemicals, by infections, or by degenerative and circulatory processes in the brain. Such conditions can certainly result in profound mental changes that would relegate them to the category of “nonordinary states of consciousness.” However, such impairments cause “trivial deliria” or “organic psychoses,” states that are very important clinically, but are not relevant for our discussion. People suffering from such states are typically disoriented; they do not know who and where they are and what date it is. In addition, their intellectual functions are significantly impaired and they typically have subsequent amnesia for their experiences.

2 *Psychology of the Future*

In this book, I will focus on a large and important subgroup of non-ordinary states of consciousness which significantly differ from the rest and represent an invaluable source of new information about the human psyche in health and disease. They also have a remarkable therapeutic and transformative potential. Over the years, daily clinical observations convinced me about the extraordinary nature of these experiences and about the far-reaching implications they have for the theory and practice of psychiatry. I found it difficult to believe that contemporary psychiatry does not recognize their specific features and does not have a special name for them.

Because I feel strongly that they deserve to be distinguished from the rest and placed into a special category, I have coined for them the name *holotropic* (Grof 1992). This composite word literally means "oriented toward wholeness" or "moving in the direction of wholeness" (from the Greek *holos* = whole and *trepein* = moving toward or in the direction of something). The full meaning of this term and the justification for its use will become clear later in this book. It suggests that in our everyday state of consciousness we identify with only a small fraction of who we really are. In holotropic states, we can transcend the narrow boundaries of the body ego and reclaim our full identity.

Holotropic States of Consciousness

In holotropic states, consciousness is changed qualitatively in a very profound and fundamental way, but it is not grossly impaired like in the organically caused conditions. We typically remain fully oriented in terms of space and time and do not completely lose touch with everyday reality. At the same time, our field of consciousness is invaded by contents from other dimensions of existence in a way that can be very intense and even overwhelming. We thus experience simultaneously two very different realities, "have each foot in a different world."

Holotropic states are characterized by dramatic perceptual changes in all sensory areas. When we close our eyes, our visual field can be flooded with images drawn from our personal history and from the individual and collective unconscious. We can have visions and experiences portraying various aspects of the animal and botanical kingdoms, nature in general, or of the cosmos. Our experiences can take us into the realm of archetypal beings and mythological regions. When we open the eyes, our perception of the environment can be illusively transformed by vivid projections of this uncon-

scious material. This can be accompanied by a wide range of experiences engaging other senses—various sounds, physical sensations, smells, and tastes.

The emotions associated with holotropic states cover a very broad spectrum that typically extends far beyond the limits of our everyday experience, both in their nature and intensity. They range from feelings of ecstatic rapture, heavenly bliss, and “peace that passeth all understanding” to episodes of abysmal terror, murderous anger, utter despair, consuming guilt, and other forms of unimaginable emotional suffering. Extreme forms of these emotional states match the descriptions of the paradisaean or celestial realms and of hells described in the scriptures of the great religions of the world.

A particularly interesting aspect of holotropic states is their effect on thought processes. The intellect is not impaired, but functions in a way that is significantly different from its everyday mode of operation. While we might not be able to rely on our judgment in ordinary practical matters, we can be literally flooded with remarkable valid information on a variety of subjects. We can reach profound psychological insights concerning our personal history, unconscious dynamics, emotional difficulties, and interpersonal problems. We can also experience extraordinary revelations concerning various aspects of nature and of the cosmos that by a wide margin transcend our educational and intellectual background. However, by far the most interesting insights that become available in holotropic states revolve around philosophical, metaphysical, and spiritual issues.

We can experience sequences of psychological death and rebirth and a broad spectrum of transpersonal phenomena, such as feelings of oneness with other people, nature, the universe, and God. We might uncover what seem to be memories from other incarnations, encounter powerful archetypal figures, communicate with discarnate beings, and visit numerous mythological landscapes. Holotropic experiences of this kind are the main source of cosmologies, mythologies, philosophies, and religious systems describing the spiritual nature of the cosmos and of existence. They are the key for understanding the ritual and spiritual life of humanity from shamanism and sacred ceremonies of aboriginal tribes to the great religions of the world.