

Introduction to Transpersonal Psychology – The Research of Stanislav Grof

In the mid-1960's, a young Czechoslovakian psychiatrist working at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague made some epoch-making discoveries concerning the fundamental structures of the human psyche. Working with a wide range of individuals involved in systematic LSD psychotherapy, Stanislav Grof and his clients encountered experiences that gradually and then irrevocably challenged the orthodox Freudian model in which he and his colleagues were working.

The content of the sessions suggested a far deeper understanding of the human psyche and the cosmos itself than had been previously imagined. After supervising three thousand sessions and studying the records of another two thousand from colleagues around the world, Grof eventually systematized a far-reaching model that accounted for the observations of his client's sessions, integrated the diversity of competing psychological theories, and reached into areas of human spirituality described by the great spiritual traditions of the world.

An Expanded Cartography of the Human Psyche

In 1976, Grof and his partner Christina developed a comparable non-drug technique for entering non-ordinary states of consciousness, which they called Holotropic Breathwork™ (from *holos*=“wholeness”; and *trepein*=“moving toward”). Throughout his long career of more than fifty-five years of research using powerful drug and non-drug catalysts, Grof discovered that individuals who enter holotropic states of consciousness have access to three broad layers of experience.

The first layer is referred to as the *biographical*. This layer contains most of the material known from conventional psychotherapy. Individuals confront traumas and conflicts left over from physical and sexual abuse, a hostile family atmosphere, sibling rivalry, or severe toilet

training. They work through emotional deprivation and unmet needs in infancy, such as isolation in an incubator or lack of bonding. They also discharge traumatic energies and emotions from serious illnesses, operations, and accidents, an important category of experiences missed by most of the major psychological schools. Especially significant were those that involved a threat to breathing such as partial suffocation, near-drowning, diphtheria, or whooping cough.

The next layer of experiences that individuals encounter, Grof termed the *perinatal* layer (from *peri*="surrounding" and *natalis*="birth"). Perinatal experiences are based around the experiences of birth labor and delivery, combined with dramatic encounters with dying and impermanence. As Grof's patients worked through these experiences, their consciousness automatically opened out into ecstatic spiritual dimensions in the universe at large. Reliving the completed birth coincided with a profound spiritual rebirth and transcendence of the fear of death.

Beyond the perinatal layer is a broad category of experiences which Grof termed the *transpersonal* or Jungian layer of the psyche, as Jung was the first major Western psychiatrist to integrate transpersonal themes in his world view. In transpersonal states an individual has access to experiences normally considered outside the range of individual awareness. The most common are embryonic, ancestral, and phylogenetic memories; identification with other people, groups of people, or all of humanity; identification with the consciousness of animals, plants, or inorganic materials; past life experiences; identification with archetypes and mythological sequences; and encounters with the Universal Mind, Absolute Consciousness, and the Macrocosmic Void.

What follows is an introduction to Grof's discoveries in the perinatal layer of the unconscious.

The Perinatal Matrices

Grof found that the perinatal layer of the psyche tends to emerge in four broad, overlapping clusters of experience, he called the *basic perinatal matrices I - IV*.

Basic Perinatal Matrix I - The Amniotic Universe, Union with the Mother

The experiences in Grof's first perinatal matrix (BPM I) are based around the intrauterine unity between mother and fetus. In a healthy womb, the conditions for the fetus are close to ideal. Oxygen and nourishment are supplied and waste products are taken away through the umbilical cord, and there is a continuous flow of warmth and meaningful connection with the mother.

Individuals who tap into these sequences in holotropic states relive specific biological details of fetal life, overlaid with experiences that share with the intrauterine situation a free-flowing lack of boundaries, such as identification with serene aquatic life forms, with the consciousness of the ocean itself, or with interstellar space. Equally common are experiences of blissful cosmic unity, which can take various cultural forms including existence in heaven, the Garden of Eden, *atman-Brahman* union, Elysian Fields, the Tao, *samadhi*, or *Tat Tvam Asi* ("Thou art That"). Grof referred to this category of transcendent melted states as *oceanic* or *Apollonian* type of ecstasy. Neptunian experiences are the most profound experiences human beings can have and satisfy our greatest need.¹

Grof further observed that these sequences are accompanied by memories that share with the uterine situation the qualities of undisturbed unity and connection. These include memories from postnatal life in which important needs are satisfied, such as harmonious periods in the family, good mothering, play with peers, and fulfilling love. There are memories of trips or vacations in beautiful natural settings, swimming in the ocean and clear lakes, and nature experienced at its best—"Mother Nature."

This matrix also has a difficult side, where the mother was under stress, using drugs or alcohol, or had ambivalent feelings toward the pregnancy. Individuals accessing these *toxic womb* memories relive the specific chemical and emotional conditions in the womb. These are accompanied by transpersonal experiences of a similar thematic type such as identification with fish in polluted waters, sequences of being invaded by aliens, experimented on by demonic entities, or suffering the influence of "bad karma." Fully experiencing these toxic or rejecting womb experiences leads to deep healing and a sense of having consumed the toxic energies and karma. When unhealed, they are an important source of hypochondria and psychotic distortions of reality in later life. In milder forms, people may have a deep fear of rejection and an inability

to emotionally bond with other human beings.

Basic Perinatal Matrix II - “No Exit” and Cosmic Engulfment

Grof’s second perinatal matrix (BPM II) is based around the onset of labor. The situation in the womb deteriorates radically as first noxious chemicals and then claustrophobic pressures dramatically interrupt the fetus’ blissful connection with the mother and alter its pristine universe. The cervix is not yet dilated and the fetus is pressed from all sides by the contracting uterine walls.

Individuals who access this layer of their psyche in holotropic states experience overwhelming feelings of “no-exit” entrapment, hopelessness, helplessness, victimization, and guilt that extend outward into their perception of the entire universe. They identify with the victims of all times and places, including populations devastated by famine and plagues, those who died in all the concentration camps and wars of history, or with all the mothers and infants who have died in labor. Natural themes that emerge include fish ensnared by an octopus, insects trapped in a spider’s web, or animals slaughtered in nature by predators.

Associated memories from postnatal life include situations that pose a threat to survival or bodily integrity such as war experiences, painful diseases, near drowning or episodes of suffocation, as well as accidents, injuries, and operations. Equally common are memories of imprisonment, brainwashing, or physical abuse. Individuals also relive severe psychological traumatizations such as an oppressive family atmosphere, threatening situations, emotional deprivation, rejection, and humiliation.

Archetypally, people influenced by BPM II report encounters with the Judging God or Devouring Mother accompanied by sequences of the Fall from Paradise, descent into hell, and cosmic engulfment. These are spontaneously depicted by the psyche in various cultural forms, relatively independent of the individual’s beliefs or culture of origin. This stage of birth is the prototype of experiences of loss, victimization, and lack of meaningful connection in human life; the pain of birth is where the separate ego is formed.

However, the difficult stages of birth are also a crucial and essential “transform station” where collective energies and karma can enter an individual lifetime to be experienced and worked through. Surrendering to Saturn’s no-exit experiences in holotropic states consumes

their constricting pressure on the psyche and allows the process to move to the next stage. The paradox is that when we are emotionally stuck, we are stuck halfway between being uncomfortable and descending deeply enough into our unconscious pain to release it. The protective ego prevents us from suffering deeply enough to work through the inner material. Our first problem is the wound of birth and our consequent fear of death and dying. The bigger problem is our repression of that wound, a repression that can gradually impoverish the entirety of life.

Basic Perinatal Matrix III - The Death-Rebirth Struggle

Grof's third perinatal matrix (BPM III) is based around the dynamic stage of labor, with the corresponding activation of powerful biological energies. The cervix is now open and the infant is slowly forced down the birth canal by uterine contractions that range between between fifty and one hundred pounds of force, a struggle for delivery that pits the mother and fetus in a synergistic effort to end the often excruciating suffering inflicted on each other.

Individuals working through this inner material experience a sense of titanic fight, activation of intense aggression, crushing mechanical pressures, and sadomasochistic feelings caused by suffocation. It is a documented biological phenomenon that choking creates a strange form of enforced sexual arousal, and that intense pain or torture, in general, also lead to an extreme form of ecstasy that transcends pain and pleasure. This is observed in individuals hanged on the gallows who frequently get erections or ejaculate, in the reports of concentration camp survivors, and in the files of Amnesty International. Other manifestations are the practices of *autoerotic asphyxiation* and the *self-flagellation* of many religious sects. The close connection between choking, suffering, and ecstasy seems to offer a kind of built-in escape valve for consciousness. When the suffering of the body becomes unbearable, human consciousness is somehow able to transcend the limits of the body-ego and reconnect with its higher Divine identity.

Birth is an event with both prolonged choking and physical agony, experiences that create an enforced sexual arousal in the delivering fetus. The fact that our first sexual experience occurs in the context of the life-threatening suffocation, excruciating pain, and activation of aggression during delivery provides a logical psychodynamic basis for many types of sexual

variations and dysfunctions in later life (Grof 1985, Grof 1980, Grof 2000).² Under ideal conditions, mothers sometimes also report that giving birth is like the ultimate sexual orgasm. Ideally, a woman does her deep inner work before pregnancy, so that her own leftover perinatal energies and emotions do not complicate her ability to surrender to the powerful natural energies of delivery.

Subjects facing this layer of their psyche also encounter scatological materials such as blood, mucus, and sometimes feces and urine; demonic energies; and purifying fire, referred to as *pyrocatharsis*. In this process, they experientially identify with both victims and perpetrators, reflecting the fact that in the dynamic stage of labor the situation is not hopeless and the individual begins to identify with the intense propelling energies of the uterus itself. These sequences are accompanied by dramatic physical manifestations including profuse sweating, projectile vomiting, frantic motor phenomena, and explosive discharges of aggression. Participants also release enormous amounts of tension in physical tremors, twitches, jerks, and complex twisting movements that resemble the infant's positions during labor. Many of these obstetric details, such as breech birth or use of forceps, can later be independently verified. As the Grof's write: "Memories of various stages of the birth trauma—basic perinatal matrices or BPMs—belong to the most common experiences in Holotropic Breathwork sessions. They accurately portray various aspects of the birth process, often with photographic details, even in individuals who have no intellectual knowledge of the circumstances of their birth (Grof 2006). This can be accompanied by various physical manifestations indicating that the memory of birth reaches to the cellular level. We have seen individuals reliving birth develop bruises in places where forceps was applied, without knowing this was part of their early history; the accuracy of this fact was later confirmed by parents or birth records. We have also witnessed changes of skin color and *petechiae* (tiny purplish red spots caused by seeping of small amounts of capillary blood into the skin) appearing in people who were born with the umbilical cord twisted around their neck" (Grof and Grof 2010).

The transpersonal side of the experience includes sequences of temptation, sacrifice, purgatory, and Judgment. Individuals also confront or identify with deities such as Shiva, Kali, or Hercules performing his Labors, or with dying-reviving figures such as Persephone, Christ, Osiris, or Dionysus. The experiences in this matrix culminate in a type of intense driving arousal that transcends pain and pleasure, which Grof referred to as *volcanic* or *Dionysian* type of

ecstasy. Facing this material in supportive contexts is followed by dramatic experiences of spiritual breakthrough and the disappearance of symptoms that had been resistant to all previous approaches.

Much of Pluto's action in an individual's lifetime can be seen as a replay of birth, an attempt by the psyche to work through, complete, and integrate the experience. The psyche has an almost relentless tendency to create and draw toward itself experiences that match the experiential quality of the unconscious inner material. Thus, a person with leftover trauma from choking in the birth canal will unconsciously create situations of high stress, with "no room to breathe" or "the world closing in." These patterns can persist indefinitely until the material is faced on the level from which it originates—as powerful leftover emotions from within the psyche.

Although the BPM III energies are universally present in humans as a potential source of psychopathology, except in individuals born by elective Caesarean section who can manifest another set of issues³, whether this part of the psyche reaches consciousness to cause problems in a given individual depends upon post-natal factors such as the quality of mothering and the experience of traumas or abuse that create pathways for the negative perinatal material to reach present consciousness. Events in childhood will reinforce either the positive or negative aspects of birth in various combinations. Good mothering and lack of significant traumas in childhood encapsulate the traumatic aspects of birth within a buffer of positive experiences. Conversely, when people experience emotional deprivation, severe traumas, or life-threatening events in childhood and later life, these traumas facilitate the emergence of the difficult perinatal energies and themes into their ongoing experience of the world.

Biographical memories associated with this matrix include struggles, fights, and adventurous activities such as active attacks in battles and revolutions, experiences in military service, rough airplane flights, cruises on a stormy ocean, or hazardous car driving. People can relive, in fast sequence, highly sensual memories of carnivals, amusement parks and nightclubs, wild parties, or orgies. Other memories include experiences of seduction or sexual abuse, and in females, delivering of their own children.

Basic Perinatal Matrix IV - Rebirth and Separation from the Mother

Grof's fourth perinatal matrix (BPM IV) is based around the completed delivery and birth, as the infant leaves the life-threatening confinement of the birth canal and begins separate biological existence. Although in many ways the variable experiences in the early days of life—including hunger, thirst, heat and cold—are less ideal than the intrauterine state, compared to the agony of the birth canal, the post-natal situation is experienced as an ecstatic liberation and reconnection with the nourishing Feminine principle.

Individuals engaged in deep self-exploration under the influence of BPM IV experience a cluster of themes centered around breakthrough and transcendence. The experiences of driving volcanic arousal and suffering of the previous stage eventually reach the extreme limit, culminating in a sense of total failure on every imaginable level—physically, emotionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Individuals feel that they have hit the absolute rock bottom of existence, an experience usually referred to as *ego death*.

This is almost immediately followed by visions of blinding white or golden light, peacock feathers, and the inside of great halls and cathedrals. Individuals experience sequences of the end of wars or revolutions, the discovery of medicine and technology that benefit all humanity, and global liberation. Archetypal themes include slaying the dragon, capturing the Golden Fleece, or drinking ambrosia with the gods on Mt. Olympus. People can identify with the completed death and rebirth of deities such as Christ, Osiris, Persephone, or Dionysus, experience an ecstatic reunion with Divine Consciousness in the form of God, of the Great Mother Goddess personified as Isis, Parvati, Demeter or Mary, or in a more abstract form as a loving and compassionate presence. They also sometimes experience what Grof and Tarnas termed *Promethean* type of ecstasy, as electrifying cosmic insights burst into their consciousness.

Individuals who reach these experiences have a sense of profound spiritual awakening, transcendence of the fear of death, and dramatic disappearance of physical and emotional symptoms. These are accompanied by feelings of heightened vitality, redemption, forgiveness, brotherly and sisterly feelings, and a high value placed on warm human relationships. People become interested in finding meaningful work, in living a less complicated way of life with “minimum consumption, maximum satisfaction,” and in acting in synergy with others to solve shared problems. At the same time, their own unique personalities become more self-assured

and they have critical attitudes toward the abuse of power.

Grof found that individuals who work through the leftover energies and emotions from birth and access the inner rebirth matrix (BPM IV) automatically discover within themselves what he calls “intrinsic human values.” These include a sense of higher responsibility, positive ethics, ideological tolerance, ecological sensitivity, and utmost respect for life. This clinical discovery supports the ancient Buddhist axiom that when we remove the arrow of suffering, compassion follows automatically.

Memories associated with this matrix include escapes from dangerous situations, the end of wars, survival of accidents, or overcoming of severe obstacles by active effort. Recalled scenes of nature include the beginning of spring, the end of an ocean storm, or sunrise.

¹ Reaching Neptunian states of *meltd* or *oceanic* type of ecstasy is a breakthrough threshold in psychotherapy and self-exploration. Grof found that subjects who reach these states experience a dramatic disappearance of symptoms, an increase in positive feelings, and a new appreciation of all aspects of life. They can also become spontaneously interested in the great mystical traditions and spiritual philosophies of world culture, including the various schools of yoga, Taoism, Kashmir Shaivism (the mystical form of Hinduism), Zen (the mystical form of Buddhism), Kabbalah (the mystical form of Judaism), Gnosticism (the mystical form of Christianity), and Sufism (the mystical form of Islam).

² See in particular the chapter “Varieties of Sexual Experience: Dysfunctions, Deviations, and Transpersonal Forms of Eros” in *Beyond the Brain*.

³ See Jane Butterfield English’s book *Different Doorway: Adventures of a Caesarean Born*, Earth Heart, 1985.