STORMY SEARCH *for the* SELF

For altered-states pioneers

Stan and Christina Grof,

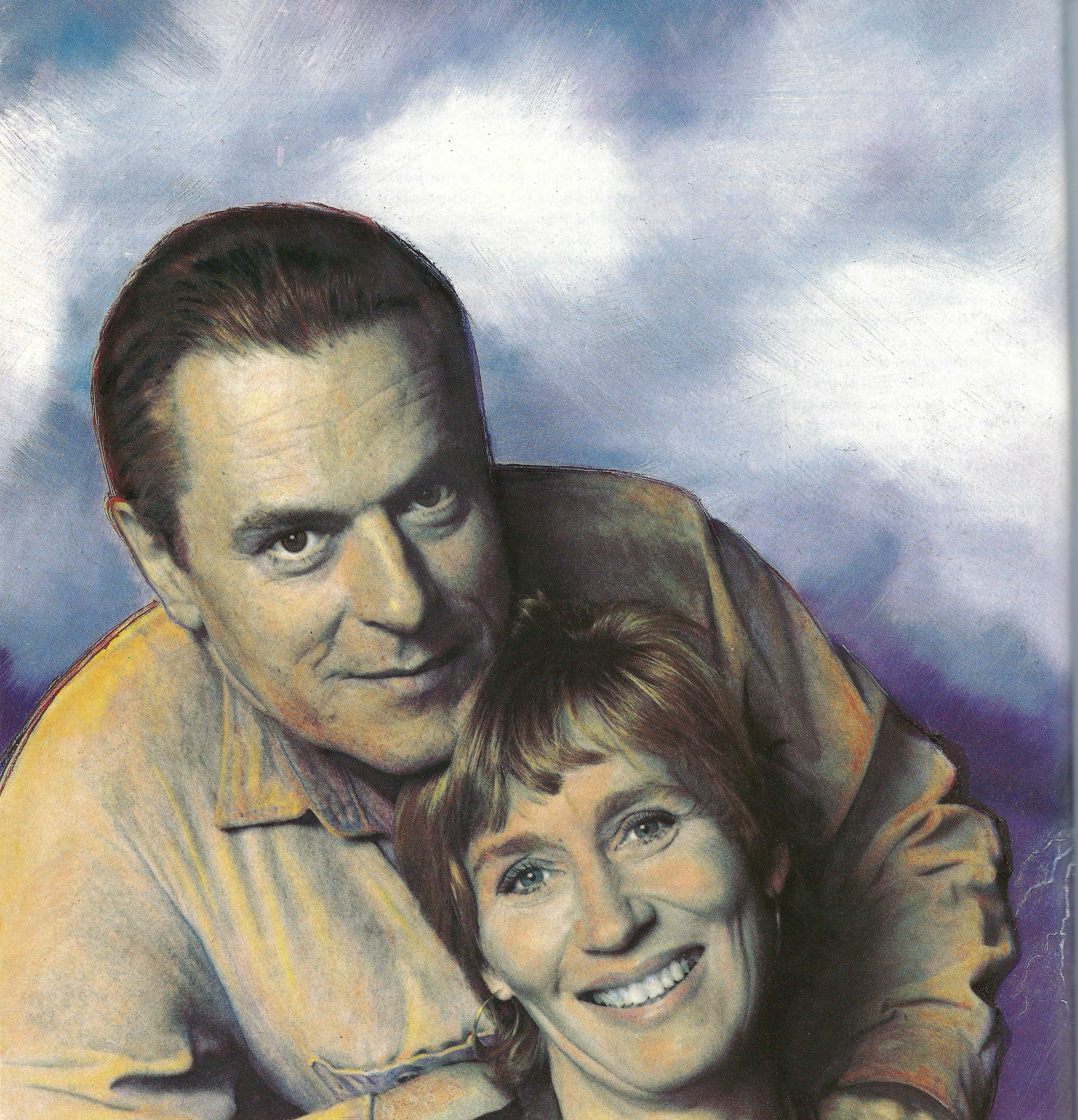
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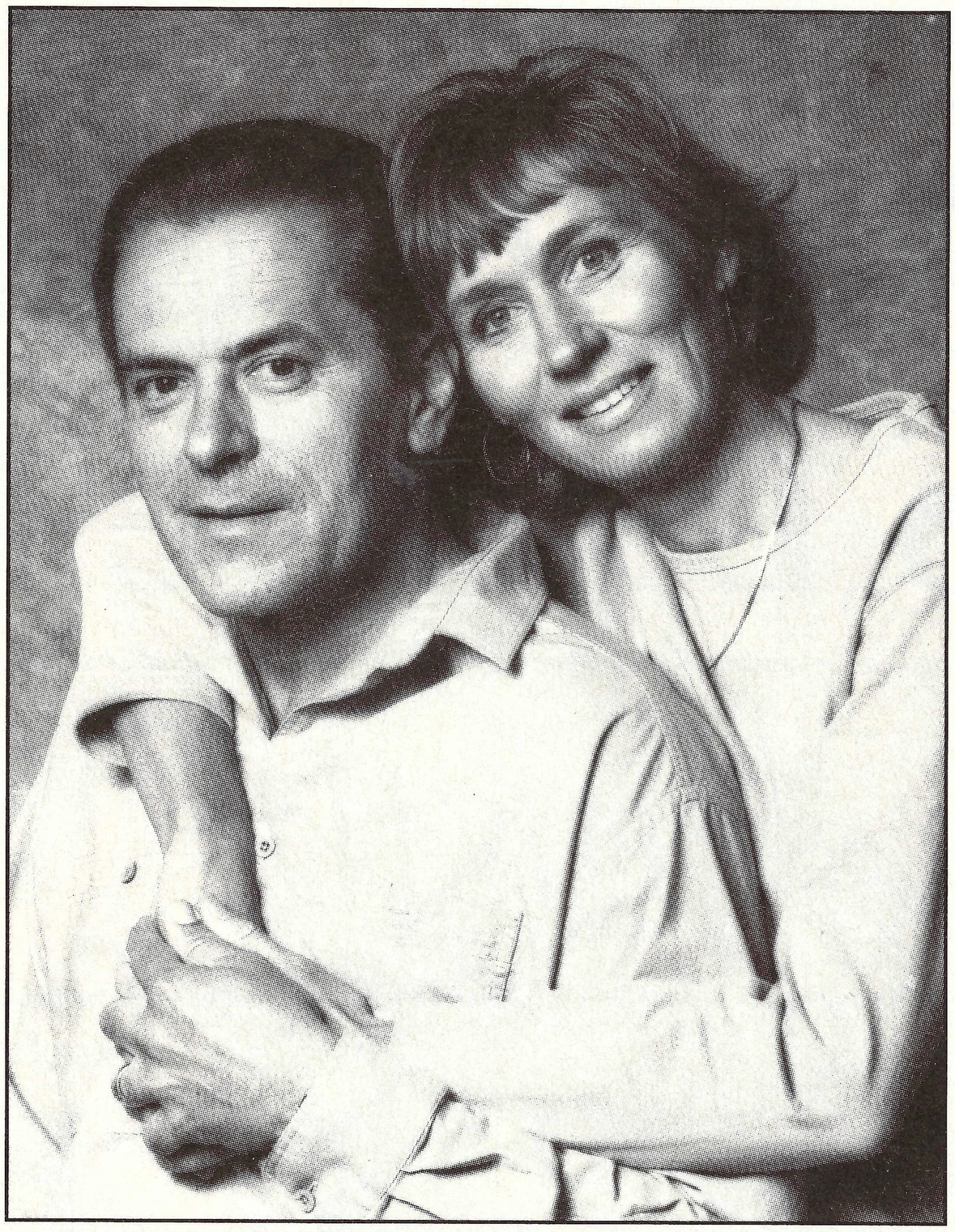
PROFILE BY KEITH THOMPSON

Illustration by Steven Aibel



For over a decade, the work of Stanislav and Christina Grof has had a profound impact on the field of transpersonal studies—the wide-ranging discipline that asserts a fundamental unity underlying the world of separate beings and objects. Stan's research and writing are widely considered to be in a class by themselves in articulating what Abraham Maslow termed "the further reaches of human nature." Christina, founder of the Spiritual Emergence Network (which offers education and referral resources for people experiencing chaotic and frequently overwhelming states of consciousness), is likewise esteemed for her contribution to understanding the creative, and often conflicted, realms of spirit and soul.

The Grofs arrived at California's Esalen Institute at different times and under different circumstances. Yet even before their meeting 15 years ago, their lives were unfolding in ways that lent a certain poetic necessity to their eventual joining. For each, paradoxical worlds of insight and experience were opening up. The myths that had given their lives meaning and substance had withered, and they were looking for a larger story. Both would find it—but not where they expected.



The Grof's two recent books, *Spiritual Emergency* and *The Stormy Search for the Self*, offer creative perspectives on inner terrain largely considered deviant by mainstream Western culture.

From Psychoanalysis to Psychedelics

As a young and newly trained psychiatrist in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in the mid-1950s, Stanislav Grof found himself captivated by psychoanalytic theory. "It seemed to hold out the promise of explaining everything about human nature," he recalls. Although he adhered to the mainstream psychiatric view that mystical experiences were manifestations of mental disease, he found himself on occasion wondering why so many people throughout history had been so deeply influenced by visionary experiences. Still, he had no doubt that medical science would eventually understand the pathologies underlying religious states.

In 1956, the psychiatric department of the Charles School of Medicine in Prague—where the 25-year-old Grof was working as a student volunteer—received an unexpected parcel from the Sandoz Pharmaceutical Laboratories in Basel, Switzerland. Little did he know as he unwrapped the parcel that he was opening Pandora's box. Inside Grof found samples of a new experimental compound, LSD-25, which was described as having extraordinary psychoactive properties. Sandoz was making this substance available to researchers throughout the world for tests and was requesting feedback about its effects and potential. Among suggested uses were the exploration of the nature and causes of psychoses, especially schizophrenia, and the training of mental health professionals.

Nothing about any of this was very surprising, Grof recalls. "It was a regular practice for pharmaceutical firms to send the latest psychoactive drugs to clinics for experimental purposes. This was a time when much of the mental health community worldwide expected, as a matter of course, that remaining questions about human nature would be answered definitively by chemicals, perhaps even by a single 'wonder drug.'" With a slightly embarrassed smile, Grof adds: "To understand this mindset, you must try to fathom how certain we brave young psychoanalysts were that Freud's theories constituted an exhaustive blueprint of the psyche. There were only a few questions about human behavior remaining to be answered anyway, we assumed. Freud's early discoveries about the dynamics of neurotic symptoms, the language of dreams, and the psychopathology of everyday life would be confirmed through a method more direct and more universally applicable than long-term psychotherapy: chemotherapy."

Grof and his colleagues found themselves fascinated by Sandoz's preliminary research suggesting interesting parallels between LSD states and the symptoms of naturally occurring psychoses. The study of LSD-based "experimental psychoses" seemed to hold out the promise of greater insight into the enigmatic nature of psychotic states. There was the additional tantalizing possibility that by experiencing a reversible "psychotic" state themselves, mental health professionals could gain intimate knowledge of their patients' inner world and, as a result, provide more effective treatment.

Excited about the opportunity for such unprecedented training, Grof volunteered to become one of the first experimental subjects, never suspecting that the encounter with his unconscious psyche would instantly overshadow his previous interest in psychoanalysis—and mark the beginning of a radical and irreversible departure from traditional psychiatric thinking.

"I couldn't believe how much I learned about my psyche in those few hours," Grof says of his first LSD experience. "I experienced a fantastic display of colorful visions, some abstract and geometrical, others figurative and filled with symbolic import. The sheer intensity of the array of emotions I felt simply amazed me." As the drug effects were culminating, enhanced by a strong stroboscopic light, Grof's primary assumptions about the meaning of life were turned upside down.

"I was hit by a radiance that seemed comparable to the epicenter of a nuclear explosion, or perhaps to the light of supernatural brilliance said in Oriental scriptures to appear to us at the moment of death," Grof recalls. "This thunderbolt catapulted me out of my body. First I lost my awareness of my immediate surroundings, then the psychiatric clinic, then Prague, and finally the planet. At an inconceivable speed my consciousness expanded to cosmic dimensions. I experienced the Big Bang, passed through black holes and white holes in the universe, identified with exploding supernovas, and witnessed many other strange phenomena that seemed to be pulsars, quasars, and other amazing cosmic events."

Though raised as an atheist, Grof had nonetheless maintained an intellectual interest in cross-cultural religion, especially Oriental philosophy. During his LSD session he grasped instantaneously that the experience he was having resembled those described in the great mystical scriptures of the world. "I was able to see the irony and paradox of the situation," he writes in *The Stormy Search for the Self.* "The Divine manifested itself and took me over in a modern laboratory in the middle of a scientific experiment conducted in a Communist country with a substance produced in the test tube of a 20th-century chemist."

Within weeks of his session, Grof joined a group of researchers comparing the results of different psychedelic substances with naturally occurring psychoses. Possessed by the idea of starting a project in which mind-altering drugs could be used as catalysts for psychoanalysis, he took a position at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague and there initiated a research project using medium dosages of LSD in patients with various forms of psychiatric disorders in a series of sessions. "We also occasionally included mental health professionals, artists, scientists, and philosophers who were interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the human psyche, enhancing creativity, or facilitating problem solving," he recalls.

Through this research, Grof was able to confirm Sandoz's claims only partially. True, when administered in some physical and psychological settings, LSD did indeed seem to trigger acute psychosis. But there was more—much more. Grof found himself witnessing in his subjects experiences that were indistinguishable from those described in ancient esoteric traditions—including powerful sequences of psychological death and rebirth; visions of deities and demons; visits to various mythological realms; dramatic sequences experienced as past-life memories; and vivid feelings of oneness with humanity, nature, and the cosmos.

Relying on the Freudian model of the psyche, with its exclusive focus on postnatal life history and the individual unconscious, and its pronounced antipathy toward religious states, Grof had learned to dismiss such experiences as psychotic, not therapeutic. Yet the emotional power, authenticity, and transformative potential of hundreds of LSD sessions with subjects from many walks of life—not to mention his own remarkable session—were indisputable. Grof found himself in a bind. On the one hand, he couldn't dismiss the emerging data from LSD psychotherapy simply because their implications were disturbing. Yet how could his mentor, Freud, be wrong, or his theories incomplete?

"When the data from LSD psychotherapy so dramatically revealed a picture of the human psyche both broader and deeper than Freud's medical model, I entered an enormous conceptual crisis," he recalls. "I knew of no way at the time to integrate transpersonal and death-rebirth experiences emerging in LSD sessions into the body of mainstream psychoanalysis. What's more, it became harder for me to overlook the gap between the brilliance of Freud's theory and the meager results produced by psychoanalytic methods. I even thought of returning to my second love, animated filmmaking."

As his faith in the enterprise of psychotherapy teetered on the verge of collapse, Grof made a creative leap that has informed the basis of his research and writing ever since. He chose to trust a growing hunch that psychedelics activate preexisting matrices of the psyche, rather than creating drug-specific hallucinations. To do otherwise—to view childhood memories as normal and archetypal and mystical experiences as pathological—would have constituted intellectual and scientific dishonesty.

Support for Spiritual Crises

Christina Grof's idea was a deceptively simple one. Instead of being labeled psychotic, drugged, and locked up in mental wards, people in the midst of difficult, sometimes extreme, yet potentially transformative inner experiences should be offered support by those who don't make the mistake of confusing spiritual crisis with mental illness. To fill this need, Christina founded the Spiritual Emergency Network (SEN) in 1980 at Big Sur's Esalen Institute.

Ten years later, with a mailing list of over 10,000 and growing, SEN takes some 150 telephone calls monthly from individuals seeking validation of their unusual experiences. About half are subsequently referred to one of SEN's more than 1,100 "helpers": psychotherapists, medical doctors, spiritual practitioners, and community members who "are willing to help others through inner crisis in a supportive nurturing manner," says SEN coordinator Jeneane Prevatt.

Besides providing such referral services, Prevatt notes, SEN offers theoretical information, bibliographies, trainings and monthly seminars, and a public speaking service addressing the concept and experience of spiritual emergency. "We attempt to encourage the inclusion of a transpersonal intervention strategy in mainstream psychology, rather than excluding or antagonizing the already established field," adds SEN activist Russ Park, who notes that "the exploration and description of psychospiritual crises and their differentiation from other mental states have only just begun."

Recognizing that spiritual growth is not always chaotic and overwhelming, a few years ago SEN substituted "emergence" for "emergency" in its name. Today SEN is based at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, 250 Oak Grove Ave., Menlo Park, CA 94025; (415) 327–2776.

And so Grof came to view Freud's work as useful in accounting for one level of the psyche, the biographically determined personal unconscious, but as woefully inadequate for explaining the totality of psychic functioning. He found himself increasingly turning to the work of Freud's erstwhile adversary C. G. Jung, whose prodigious works had elaborated likenesses among the events of cross-cultural mythology and primary energies of the psyche, which he termed archetypes.

In the years that followed, Grof made additional creative leaps, including recognizing that his emerging map of the human psyche was new only from the viewpoint of Western academic psychiatry. "It became clear that I had rediscovered what Aldous Huxley called 'perennial philosophy,' an understanding that has emerged with some minor variations again and again in different countries and historical periods," Grof recalls. His study of the different systems of yoga, Buddhist teachings, the Tibetan Vajrayana, Kashmir Shaivism, Taoism, Sufism, Kabbalah, and Christian mysticism confirmed his view that maps similar to his own had existed in various cultures for centuries or even millennia.

When an invitation came in the mid-1960s to do LSD research at the Maryland Psychiatric Center in Catonsville, Grof accepted, bringing with him one of the most unusual collections of data ever to clear U.S. customs: voluminous records of some 1,000 psychotherapeutic sessions conducted with subjects under the influence of LSD. He arrived intending to share his research with creative American colleagues.

Several years later, in the spring of 1968, Soviet tanks rolled through the streets of Prague and crushed the flower of political and cultural reform that had taken root there. This brutal moment only served to confirm in Grof's mind what his heart had already decided: He would not soon be returning to his Eastern European homeland.

Into the Maelstrom

Christina Grof (then Christina Healy) came to Esalen several years later in the midst of a full-blown psychospiritual crisis for which she had no name and about which she had little understanding. She kept telling herself she wasn't crazy, and sometimes she believed her own assurances. She was recommended to the controversial oasis of personal growth by Joseph Campbell, her not-yet-famous former Sarah Lawrence College professor and mentor, to meet the one person Campbell was sure could help guide her through the tortured inner maze she was attempting to navigate: Stanislav Grof.

"I had been living a normal enough middle-class life as a housewife and mother," Christina recalls. "Having always been athletic, I took up hatha yoga as a physical discipline, knowing nothing of its spiritual dimension and power to awaken unusual energies and experiences." Looking back, Christina suspects that in becoming adept at advanced yogic postures and breathing practices without the close guidance of a spiritual teacher, she was effectively setting herself up for the "dramatic inner awakening" she experienced while in labor with her first child, Nathaniel, in 1968.

As people nearby guided her through Lamaze breathing exercises, "I felt a sudden snap somewhere inside of me, as unfamiliar and extremely powerful energies began streaming through my body. I began shaking uncontrollably as enormous electrical tremors coursed from my toes up my legs and spine to the top of my head. Brilliant mosaics of white light exploded inside my skull, and I felt strange, automatic breathing rhythms taking over." At once excited and terrified by her experience, Christina was given two shots of morphine as soon as her son was delivered. "Soon, the wonder faded and I became embarrassed and fearful," Christina writes in *The Stormy Search for the Self.* "I was a restrained, well-mannered woman who had a strong sense of authority over my life, and now I had completely lost control."

Christina quickly pulled herself together—for a while. Two years later she had a similar experience during the final stages of her daughter Sarah's delivery. This time her experiences were more intense: dramatic inner visions featuring biological, religious, and mythic motifs of birth and death; auditory experiences of choral music and rhythmic chanting; unsettling coincidences linking thoughts, images, and hunches with events in the phenomenal world; and assorted strange bodily experiences, including spontaneous yoga asanas accompanied by painful vibratory rushes of energy. The large injection of tranquilizing drugs she received not only stopped her symptoms, but also reminded her that "whatever was going on was somehow a sign of illness."

"When the data from LSD psychotherapy so dramatically revealed a picture of the human psyche both broader and deeper than Freud's medical model, I entered an enormous conceptual crisis," Stan recalls.

A self-described "good girl at heart," Christina did her best to repress all vestiges of what she considered "an inappropriate and humiliating occurrence." She spent most of her time with her children while continuing her practice of hatha yoga. One day a friend mentioned that an Indian guru named Swami Muktananda was offering a three-day chanting and meditation retreat in Honolulu. As her marriage was falling apart, she looked forward to a weekend away from home. "With no idea, really, of what I was getting into, I signed up for the retreat."

Swami Muktananda was said to be capable of awakening spirituality in people through a look, a touch, or a word. On the second day of the retreat, entirely unexpectedly, Christina received *shaktipat* (transmission of kundalini energy) when Muktananda fixed his gaze upon her "and then, with some force, slapped me several times on the forehead with his hand." That, she recalls, was "all it took to blow the lid off the energies and emotions I had been holding down since Sarah's birth." Within moments, as if she had been "plugged into a high-voltage socket," Christina found herself shaking uncontrollably, "being breathed by an automatic rhythm seemingly beyond my control," flooded by a multitude of visions, both beatific and demonic, weeping as she felt herself being born, experiencing death, "plunged into pain and ecstasy, strength and gentleness, love and fear, depths and heights."

The genie was out of the bottle, Christina realized; hers was a course now beyond her control. Through Muktananda's guidance, she knew her symptoms represented a larger-than-ordinary unfoldment requiring skillful navigation rather than willful

suppression; yet she lacked the day-by-day support she increasingly saw as necessary for making safe passage. With her marriage on the rocks and her self-confidence and personal esteem at an all-time low, Christina decided to contact Joseph Campbell, with whom she had remained in touch over the years. This was the summer of 1975.

Over lunch, Christina described her recent life in painstaking detail to the man who during her college days had demonstrated such virtuosity in the fields of myth, religion, and psychology. As she spoke, Campbell recognized strong similarities between her experiences and the phenomena known to mystics of India as "kundalini awakening," a complicated, ritualized spiritual unfoldment said to purify and activate subtle bodily energy centers called chakras.

"I have a friend in California, at a place called Esalen, who knows about these things," Campbell finally said. "Why don't you go see him?" Why not, indeed? Christina thought to herself. Having tried everything else imaginable, she made arrangements to travel to Esalen, in California's Big Sur, where Stan Grof had been invited by cofounders Michael Murphy and Richard Price to be the institute's first scholar-in-residence. She arrived not long after Stan had completed his first book, *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research.*

Here Stan presented his preliminary mappings of a new model of the human psyche based on the research he had begun years earlier at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague and continued at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Christina found herself stunned as she read Stan's conclusions based on people's experiences during more than 4,000 LSD sessions. "I knew next to nothing about drugs and had certainly not tried LSD," she says, "yet the descriptions I was reading exactly matched many of my own experiences of birth, death, rebirth, and spirituality as well as the wide range of emotions and physical sensations."

Christina was especially heartened by Stan's capacity to "normalize" her experience. "He was saying that although these experiences can be dramatic, arduous, disorganizing, and frightening, it is important to stay with the process and move through it. I came to understand that if these experiences are properly supported, confronted, and integrated, they can be transformative, therapeutic, healing—maybe even evolutionary. This was just what I needed to hear.

Stan, in turn, had been studying what he saw as striking parallels among the psychedelic experience and nonordinary states of consciousness associated with aboriginal healing ceremonies, rites of passage and initiatory practices, cross-cultural shamanic procedures, and the practices of numerous mystical and yogic traditions. Christina had arrived on his doorstep living a process Stan saw as resembling what anthropologists have described as "shamanic illness"—powerful death-rebirth sequences accompanying experiences of travel through spirit underworlds and upper worlds, which effectively connect the shaman to primordial being. How extraordinary that among Stan's current interests was a phenomenon little known to Western psychology: kundalini awakening.

Stan brought with him from his native Czechoslovakia one of the most unusual collections of data ever to clear U.S. customs: voluminous records of some 1,000 psychotherapeutic sessions conducted with subjects under the influence of LSD.

The Esalen meeting was auspicious for personal reasons as well. Stan's marriage was ending, as had Christina's. The attraction between them was mutual and immediate, no doubt in part because they had both peered beyond their previous understandings of reality and were opening to new possibilities. Beyond this, they were simply ready—for love, and for each other.

Bottoming Out and Healing

The respite from crisis afforded the Grofs by their honeymoon was a short one. Only a few months after beginning her new married life, Christina was inundated by more of the extreme physical and mental symptoms with which she had become so familiar. Strange coincidences filled her life: her mention of someone from her distant past would be followed the same day by a letter or phone call from that person. After sketching an image from one of her visions, the next day she would find the same image while leafing through an unfamiliar book. To make matters worse, Christina's ex-husband had obtained physical custody of their two children. "The pain of losing them was unbearable," she remembers.

Christina took strength from Stan's assurances that she was experiencing not irredeemable sickness but cleansing and healing. They coined the term "spiritual emergency" to describe the process. "The worst thing you can do," Stan told her, "is to resist what is happening; that will only make it more difficult. The best thing is to go completely into whatever comes up, fully experiencing it and moving through it." Christina did just that, even as images of hideous demons and voracious monsters ripped her to shreds, even as she found herself identifying viscerally with Christ as well as his murderers, even as she "screamed with fear and pain, rolled on the floor in agony."

Even though she had never before experienced so great a hell, through it all "I knew intuitively that Stan was right: This event, as frightening and bewildering as it seemed, was a sacred time of sudden expansion. Somehow, through the confusion and the pain, I sensed the positive potential of the experience."

After this five-day episode, Christina felt a clarity and sense of purpose she hadn't experienced since her remarkable rite of passage began. She knew she hadn't yet encountered her final hurdle, but she was ready, even enthusiastic, to rejoin the relatively stable collective consensus known as ordinary reality. This she did by coleading with Stan workshops at Esalen and around the world featuring a body of work based on their growing realization that the states of consciousness enabled through LSD were also accessible through focused breathing methods combined with evocative music, bodywork, and art. They christened their method holotropic therapy (from the Greek *holos*, "whole" and *trapein*, "moving in the direction of").

This tentative forward momentum ground to a halt in 1981 when Christina met the hurdle she had been tacitly expecting: another episode, five years after her first spiritual emergency at Esalen. This one lasted for three and a half weeks

and centered almost exclusively on death. What disturbed her most was that, unlike her previous encounters, which had ended with an experience of rebirth, this time Christina was unable to find a point of resolution.

The reason became clear only later. Her arduous travel schedule, the intense emotional explorations, and her own demanding inner states had left her constantly depleted—as a result of which she had become dependent on alcohol as a tranquilizer.

"I found that when the airline cocktail cart rolled around, a couple of drinks would take the edge off. What I didn't know was that the disease of alcoholism is very prevalent in my family, and for that reason I was a prime candidate. I was hooked instantly. The alcoholism progressed rapidly, and it became difficult to distinguish the manifestations of the kundalini process from those of the disease. The resulting confusion, along with my unshakable denial, was a deadly combination."

In January 1986 Christina entered a residential 28-day treatment program for chemical dependency. On day 10, she hit proverbial bottom. "Somehow that state of physical, emotional, and spiritual bankruptcy was the ego-death experience that had been left uncompleted for all those years before. Instead of having finished that experience internally, I had acted it out in a horrible, self-destructive way through my disease."

But after bottoming out, "a profound and awesome period of healing began." Among other things, she has experienced a complete clearing of the dramatic manifestation of the kundalini. "The once-jarring energies have become smooth and flowing and the chaos has been transformed into creativity," she reports. "This doesn't mean my life is always simple and easy, but its natural ups and downs no longer overwhelm me. For the first time in my life, I feel a general ease in my existence, and [here she pauses, visibly settling into herself] "after years of longing for a felt-contact with the presence I perceive to be God, I am finding that it is possible, with some effort on my part, to feel that connection every day of my life."

Completing the Journey

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." So writes Joseph Campbell in his classic book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* which summarizes the single motif he saw at the core of mythologies the world over. In mythic and mundane realms alike, Campbell maintained, the hero's journey is complete only when he or she returns from the depths with a vision or some action capable of reinvigorating the community.

Christina, having met her most terrifying inner dragons, emerged from her labyrinthine journey passionate about making support available to people around the world undergoing rites of passage similar to her own.

Perhaps the potency of Stan and Christina Grof's recent work stems from their having completed a round of the cycle that Campbell calls the hero's journey. Both entered regions of supernatural wonder, encountered fabulous forces, underwent initiatory ordeals, returned to act upon their respective discoveries—and began further explorations together.

Rather than discarding the unsettling data of LSD psychotherapy, Stan wrestled with this data until it became clear that what had to be discarded was the hypothesis that the LSD-induced state amounts to a "toxic psychosis," some unspecified reaction of the brain to a noxious chemical. Instead, he came to realize that the content of an LSD session "expresses in a condensed symbolic dramatization the psychophysiological, emotional, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual problems most relevant at the time of the session."

During this tumultuous period Stan also continued writing. In *Beyond the Brain,* he articulated his premise that the origin and cause of much human suffering rests with phenomena related to birth (perinatal experiences) and universal archetypes of birth, death, and resurrection that unconsciously shape our worldview and life experience in profound ways. His third solo book, *The Adventure of Self-Discovery,* outlines the basis for holotropic therapy, aimed at experientially accessing perinatal experiences and the transpersonal domains to which they open.

Christina, having eyeballed her most terrifying inner dragons, emerged from her labyrinthine journey passionate about making support available to people around the world undergoing rites of passage similar to her own. In 1980 she founded the Spiritual Emergence Network to assist others in realizing the transformative potentials of nonordinary experiences. Of late she has emerged as an articulate spokesperson for the nascent effort to explore the spiritual dimensions of addiction.

Then, of course, there is their shared journey. During their first years together the Grofs authored *Beyond Death,* a book examining cross-cultural artistic representations of afterlife. Their two recently completed books, *Spiritual Emergency* and *The Stormy Search for the Self,* offer creative perspectives on inner terrains largely pigeonholed as "deviant" by rationalistic modern Western culture. Holotropic therapy came into being as a result of their joint efforts. By the end of 1990, more than 100 certified holotropic therapists will be practicing this work in various settings throughout the world.

Bringing It All Back Home

A visit to the Grofs' home in January 1990 is sufficient to challenge this article's inadvertent implication that Christina and Stan have taken up permanent residence in a swirling psychospiritual maelstrom. Far from it. Nowhere near their doorstep does one find evidence of the kind of chaos that inhabited their recent past. Nor, for that matter, is one likely to encounter two "pioneer explorers of human possibilities" or "modern-day visionaries of the spirit," as the Grofs are sometimes enthusiastically described, to their continuing embarrassment, by those who value their contributions.

One finds instead two conventional-seeming people sorting through chaos of a more mundane sort, such as the aftermath of an extended holiday visit by Christina's son and daughter and a handful of their friends from college. Stoking hot embers in the fireplace, Stan speaks with excite-

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HOLOTROPIC THERAPY:

Overcoming the Fear of Death?

Stan Grof is standing on a podium in a garishly lit San Francisco hotel ballroom, discussing the role of focused breathing, amplified music, directed bodywork, and mandala drawing (the core elements of the Grofs' holotropic therapy) in helping to bring about "shifts in the dynamic interplay of unconscious constellations that act as governing systems of the psyche." As he speaks, Christina paces calmly in the back of the room, getting a feel for the group that has registered for the weekend holotropic therapy workshop, which begins with tonight's lecture.

Stan addresses the myriad ways people can get stuck and unstuck; how difficult it is to evaluate the outcome of traditional verbal psychotherapy, extending as it often does for months and sometimes years; and how the changes that occur are more accurately a measure of the interplay of events in the patient's life than a reflection of the therapist's virtuosity. The changes would probably have happened anyway, he explains.

"Let me conclude with what I consider to be the most important point," Stan says. "At bottom there is no way to resolve deep existential crises in one's life, other than through accessing certain intrinsic, powerful, healing, nonordinary states of consciousness—states that traditional, verbally oriented psychotherapies access very rarely, and then by accident. Until you have processed the feeling matrix of the most fundamental experience of your life, birth, and faced and overcome your fear of dying, you will be held an emotional hostage."

He adds, "But if you undertake an experiential journey through birth and death, contacting and releasing blocked energies at many levels, the picture changes dramatically. Activating the psyche through the breath induces powerful states of consciousness which can change the dynamic equilibrium underlying symptoms, transforming them into a stream of extraordinary experiences, consuming the symptoms in the process."

The next morning, an air of nervous expectancy abounds as workshop participants stream into the ballroom, which seems more spacious now that the chairs have been removed. Joined by several associates who have been certified by the Grofs as holotropic therapy practitioners, Christina and Stan—walking through different parts of the ballroom, taking turns speaking into hand-held microphones—give instructions for what they term "the breath work." Participants are paired: partner one "will breathe" today, partner two tomorrow. After sundry procedural concerns are addressed, the hotel ballroom lights are brought down, and gentle music emanates from four giant speakers placed strategically throughout the room.

The originality of what many have come to call "the Grof work" rests not so much in their view of breath as a significant transformer of experience. Wilhelm Reich had already pointed to a causal relationship between changes in breathing patterns and changes in consciousness, as had yogic and contemplative traditions centuries earlier. What makes holotropic therapy unique is the container or context the Grofs establish in their workshops: breathing, music, movement, body release methods, artwork, permission to experience unusual mind-body phenomena as "normal," and a far-reaching model of human possibilities.

Their premise, born of numerous experiential workshops around the world in the last decade, is that a simple increase in the rate of breathing is sufficient to loosen psychological defenses and allow release of both unconscious and superconscious material. As breathing continues, facilitated by music of varying rhythms and tempos, breathers allow themselves to come into direct contact with deeply held bioenergetic phenomena. These may range from dramatic catharsis (including screaming, coughing, tremors, and vomiting), to prolonged contractions and spasms (arching of the back, for example, and other spontaneous postures sometimes resembling yoga asanas).

In this colossal hall, 75 people have begun to slowly increase their breathing, attended by 75 "sitters." As the music becomes more intense, so does the breathing, as if the room itself were inhaling and exhaling. Some breathers remain relatively quiet, others show agitated motor activity: complex twisting movements, writhing, flailing, rolling around on the padded mats placed throughout the room. A shift in music to rapid percussive tribal chanting triggers stronger movements: pounding, kicking, digging. Eventually the room is filled with sounds of gagging, wretching, shrieking, convulsive laughter, and choking. Many are sweating profusely; some lay coiled, fetus-like, straining for elusive release.

Supported by a cadre of senior holotropic therapists, Christina and Stan make the rounds, kneeling next to breathers, sometimes providing physical resistance with huge throw-pillows to help breathers breathe through energy blocks. Many are in obvious pain; others seem in rapture. After nearly two hours the music surpasses crescendo and energies in the room begin to subside, growing gentler, like waves lapping a beach. For most, "the crisis of birth" has passed. Stan stays close to a woman undergoing an especially rough passage.

In the hour that follows, each breather-sitter team joins 10 other pairs in adjoining rooms, where breathers use brightly colored crayons and pastels to depict their experience on sheets of newsprint. The images are striking: complex geometric shapes, birthings, mythic marriages, crucifixion scenes, archetypal interstellar beings, blissful and wrathful deities, dreamy impressionistic themes, sequences of cosmic creation and destruction. Some describe reliving and coming to terms with childhood traumas (reports of parental beatings, sexual abuse, and near-drownings are common); others describe "memories" of their first loss of Paradise mixed with images of biological birth. A woman relates how, during her breathing session, certain "unbearable" images of the absurdity and futility of life suddenly exploded into brilliant, blissful colors, followed by the cathartic release of back and shoulder spasms she has lived with for 20 years.

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Stormy Search for the Self

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ment about the remarkable new freedoms emerging in Eastern Europe, including his native Czechoslovakia. Christina talks about how Alcoholics Anonymous meetings have come to be an ordinary yet altogether significant part of her weekly life.

Both are planning to write new books —Christina on the spiritual dimensions of addiction, Stan on the deeper implications of worlds that come into view through nonordinary states of consciousness. Yet on this day their focus turns to what they will *not* be doing so much of: answering the phone, traveling, teaching, public speaking, and what they gleefully term "gratuitous purposive activity of all kinds."

This is echoed in the exacting conditions they place on today's final interview —that it be short, leaving ample time to hike to nearby Stinson Beach for a midwinter picnic. Half a dozen of their friends will join us. When the time comes, Christina announces, with mock impatience: "Enough! Enough talk of manuscripts and mysticism and chaotic personal histories!" "Yes," echoes Stan, as he affixes a food-filled backpack to his shoulders, "let our trek to the feast begin." ❑

Keith Thompson is currently writing a book probing the symbolic meanings of the UFO phenomenon, to be published by Addison-Wesley. He lives near Santa Cruz, California.

RESOURCES

Books by Stan and Christina Grof:
The Stormy Search for the Self
(Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1990; available through *YJ*'s Book & Tape Source on page 84.)
Spiritual Emergency
(Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989; available through *YJ*'s Book & Tape Source on page 84.)
Beyond Death: The Gates of Consciousness
(New York: Thames & Hudson, 1980)
Books by Stan Grof:
The Adventure of Self-Discovery
(Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1987)
Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death, & Transcendence in Psychotherapy
(Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1985)

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Others bring back remarkable tales of resonance at an almost cellular level—with other persons, groups, and group consciousness (an Israeli woman relates viscerally identifying, to her utter astonishment,

with what she calls "the very soul of Nazism"), animals and animal spirits, plants and botanical processes, matter and inorganic processes, and extraterrestrial consciousness. A dentist describes her "embryonic and fetal memories"; an experimental physicist going through "an early mid-life crisis" tells of "mind-boggling" ancestral and past-life experiences; a self-styled "skeptical hard-nosed Freudian" speaks through tears about his encounter with spirit guides and suprahuman beings; a retired accountant seeking "new life" from the workshop tells of experiencing her husband as several distinct "mythic male figures."

Many describe receiving creative inspiration regarding personal life dilemmas—including how to make a transition from one life stage to the next. Notably absent is a need to argue for the literal truth of any particular experience, as in, "I know I really did visit another physical galaxy!" From group to group, most first-hand reports deal less with content than with meaning. Most say they understand or appreciate in important new ways, even though few are yet prepared to specify how or even what they understand or appreciate. When someone mentions the "suchness", the "just-so" quality of the experience, many heads nod in agreement. ❑