

Chapter One

The Pivot to Nonordinary States

The main difficulty here is to procure empirical material from which we can draw reasonably certain conclusions, and unfortunately this difficulty is not an easy one to solve. The experiences in question are not ready to hand. We must therefore look in the obscurest corners and summon up courage to shock the prejudices of our age if we want to broaden the basis of our understanding of nature.

—C. G. Jung, *Synchronicity*

My oldest son went on his first vision quest while I was working on this manuscript. As part of his preparation for this rite of passage, he met with the Native American elders who were overseeing his quest to be “talked out into spirit.” Being “talked out” involved making a deep inventory of his life to prepare himself mentally and emotionally for the experiences that might surface during his quest. After his stay in the wilderness was over and before any contact with his family or friends was permitted, he was “talked in from spirit” by the same elders, sharing his experiences with them and receiving their advice on how to integrate them into his daily life.

In some respects this entire book is an exercise in “talking myself in from spirit,” as it reflects my attempt to comprehend years of experiences in nonordinary states of consciousness and to integrate their insights into our understanding of human existence. Along the way I have come to believe, together with many others who have explored these states in a systematic manner, that these states are not only powerful agents of personal transformation but also important sources of information about the universe we live in. They offer us

insights into not just our personal mind but the deep ecology of mind itself. As the restrictions of the physically grounded mind are lifted, one begins to gain access to what could be described as the universe's inner experience of itself.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this development coming when it has at this time in human history. Just when Western culture had convinced itself that the entire universe was a machine, that it moves with a machine's precision and a machine's blindness, the ability to experience the inner life of the universe is being given back to us. Because machines are not conscious, the appearance of consciousness in the universe has been interpreted as a cosmic accident. The entire human endeavor has been emptied of existential purpose and significance because it has been judged to be a product of blind chance. When one gains access to the inner experience of the universe, however, one learns that, far from being an accident, our conscious presence here is the result of a supreme and heroic effort. Far from living our lives unnoticed in a distant corner of an insentient universe, we are everywhere surrounded by orders of intelligence beyond reckoning.¹

There is a parallel, I believe, between how the academic community has been responding to research on nonordinary states and how it initially responded to the feminist critique of patriarchal culture. Centuries of custom first led scholars to deny that there was anything unique to women's experience that might revolutionize our intellectual and social institutions, and only slowly did feminists convince us that we had been missing half the picture. A similar battle is now being fought over nonordinary states. The mainstream voices that previously marginalized the testimony of women are now attempting to marginalize the testimony coming from these states, resulting in a continued skewing of our philosophical and psychological models in the direction of physical reality.² And yet, as with the gender issue, this resistance is misguided, because the kind of knowledge one acquires in nonordinary states of consciousness does not negate but complements and extends the knowledge gained in ordinary states.

When I am making this point with my students, I sometimes draw an analogy with the daytime and nighttime skies. In the bright light of the daytime sky, our immediate surroundings are illumined with great clarity. This clarity is useful for carrying out the pragmatic chores of daily existence, but it overwhelms our more subtle vision and hides the stars that are always present. When the glare of the sun retreats and the night sky shows itself again, we exchange

the experience of the close at hand for the experience of the far away. As the stars return, our vision expands to take in the larger rhythms of the cosmos. The night sky does not negate the daytime sky, but gives us a larger frame of reference from which to understand the trajectory of life.

Imagine for a moment a civilization that denied itself the vision of the night sky, a society where by custom no one dared leave their homes after sundown. Trapped within the sun-drenched world, they would have intimate knowledge of the things that lie near at hand but be unaware of these distant realities. Without knowledge of the night sky, they would have a deeply incomplete understanding of the larger cosmos within which they lived. They would not be able to answer the question, “Where did we come from?” with any accuracy. Cut off from the vision of the stars, they would be restricted to the relative immediacy of here and now, stranded in near-time and near-space. They would never discover our celestial lineage, never place our solar system in the Milky Way or the Milky Way in a cosmos almost too large to be imagined.

We are this civilization, of course. Taken as a whole, Western thought has committed itself to a vision of reality that is based almost entirely on the daylight world of ordinary states of consciousness while systematically ignoring the knowledge that can be gained from the nighttime sky of nonordinary states. As the anthropologist Michael Harner puts it, we are “cogni-centric.” Trapped within the horizon of the near-at-hand mind, our culture creates myths about the unreliability and irrelevance of nonordinary states. Meanwhile, our social fragmentation continues to deepen, reflecting in part our inability to answer the most basic existential questions. As long as we restrict ourselves to knowledge gained in ordinary states, we will not be able provide satisfactory answers to questions about meaning or value, because neither meaning nor value exist in mere sensation nor in the compounds of sensation. Similarly, we will not be able to explain where we came from or why our lives have the shape they do as long as we systematically avoid contact with the deeper dimensions of mind that contain the larger patterns that structure our existence.³

Though of enormous importance, the victories of the age of enlightenment were purchased at the terrible cost of systematically disparaging the depths of human experience and of prematurely dismissing our ability to penetrate these depths. In the modern university, being “rational” or “logical” includes the rider of not straying too far from sensate experience and its derivatives, and “critical think-

ing” is marked by its epistemological commitment to ordinary states of consciousness. Meanwhile, nonordinary states are little explored or understood, and their relevance to basic questions being raised in epistemology, philosophy of mind, or even ethics is seldom acknowledged. But this is changing. As the twentieth-first century opens, new evidence is challenging old assumptions in practically every department. Seldom have so many axioms been questioned on so many fronts at the same time. The historian of ideas can barely keep up with the revolutions brewing, and one of these revolutions, a major one I believe, centers on nonordinary states of consciousness.

The starting point of this book in the broadest sense, then, is the simple premise that philosophical reflection must today include the findings of depth psychology and the critical study of nonordinary states. Any philosophical system that excludes these states will produce a vision of reality that is profoundly limited in scope. Its refinements in one direction will be continually undermined by its inadequacies in the other, and the resulting system will be hopelessly imbalanced.

The Autobiographical Element in Transpersonal Philosophy

The philosophical discussion of nonordinary states cannot be done well from a distance but requires the commitment of personal experience. As Ken Wilber explains in *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, to do philosophy in the transpersonal mode requires training in the spiritual disciplines. First must come years of transformative practice that push back the boundaries of experience. As these practices are mastered, one is gradually “ushered into a worldspace in which new data disclose themselves.”⁴ With repetition, new levels of experience and understanding open and eventually stabilize, leading to the third stage of checking one’s experiences against the experiences of others within the spiritual community.

There is a kind of knowledge that comes from digesting other people’s experiences and a another kind entirely that comes from taking the inner journey oneself. If one has only secondhand knowledge of these states, one labors under a great disadvantage. Verbal accounts in books hint at but never capture the extraordinary depth and texture of the experiences that open in them. Only if you have first-hand knowledge of the territory can you appreciate how hard language has been pushed before it falls silent, unable to say more yet with so much more needing to be said. Only if you have person-

ally entered these waters can you understand the strength and scope of the currents that flow here. Without this personal knowledge, you can quickly lose control of the material. You may miss connections that are obvious to the experienced eye and see correlations where there are none. By the same token, one's transpersonal reflections necessarily reflect the limits of one's experience. The experiences of others can help extend one's intuitions but are no substitute for experience itself. Because there is no getting around this basic restriction, the best one can do is own it, even take refuge in it. This means abandoning the goal of trying to give a definitive account of the entire transpersonal domain and instead simply bringing forward a perspective based on one's experience and placing it in respectful dialogue with the perspectives brought by other explorers.⁵

The conflict of philosophical paradigms begins with an argument over what experiences it is possible for human beings to have. Only if we are convinced that certain experiences actually occur will we then begin to ask about the implications of these experiences for human existence. I have had articles rejected by professional journals because cautious editors simply could not believe that the experiences I was analyzing were possible, in this case not my own experiences but ones previously published by others. Incredulous referees penciled in the margins comments like: "How is it possible for a human being to actually experience this?" or "How do you mean this? Metaphorically?" Mainstream philosophy and psychology is based almost exclusively on ordinary states of consciousness. Lacking personal experience of nonordinary states, these editors naturally could not comprehend how the boundaries of experience could be stretched to such seemingly impossible limits.

Over time I began to realize that if the transpersonal paradigm was going to make inroads in mainstream thought, individuals were going to have to be willing to incorporate into their analysis the actual experiences on which their proposals were based. *The more radical or aparadigmatic the concepts one is proposing, the more important it is to provide the experiential evidence for the claims being made.* In transpersonal philosophy, where the experiences in question are not shared by the population at large, it is particularly important to own the experiences that underpin one's theoretical analysis. The situation parallels the difficulty survivors of near-death episodes (NDEs) have had getting their observations to be taken seriously by the medical community. It was only after thousands of NDEers were willing to make their experiences part of the public record that resistance began to soften, and we began to move

to the next stage of asking what these experiences were revealing to us about the cosmos we inhabit.

For all these reasons there is no escaping the necessity of writing from a basis in personal experience when addressing the questions raised in this volume. Thus, the chapters that follow weave together theoretical discussion and my own session experiences. I hope this autobiographical element will rest lightly on the project, however, and will not distract attention from the true focus of inquiry. Furthermore, this is not autobiography in the usual sense, for the levels of consciousness discussed here are universal and, as we will see, show up in contexts as divergent as contemplative monasteries and hospital emergency rooms.⁶ Let me now describe the investigative discipline used in this study.

Stanislav Grof and Nonordinary States of Consciousness

While meditation has been an important part of my life for many years, the methods of exploring consciousness that lie at the heart of this book are those pioneered by Stanislav Grof. I encountered Grof's work shortly after completing graduate school in 1978 and since that time my self-exploration and philosophical reflection have unfolded in dialogue with his research, together with the great wisdom traditions of the world, especially Christianity and Buddhism. In *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1976) and *LSD Psychotherapy* (1980), Grof summarized sixteen years of clinical experience exploring the therapeutic potential of psychedelic substances, particularly LSD-25, ten years at the Psychiatric Research Institute of Prague and six as chief of psychiatric research at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Although the therapeutic use of psychedelics was no longer legal in the United States when he wrote these books, Grof believed that our society would eventually find the wisdom to reappropriate this extraordinary family of drugs that had demonstrated their safety and therapeutic effectiveness in carefully structured clinical settings for many years.⁷ In *The Adventure of Self-Discovery* (1985), Grof drew upon twelve years of work as scholar-in-residence at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, during which he and his wife Christina created a therapeutic method called "Holotropic Breathwork" that evoked powerful nonordinary states of consciousness without the use of psychoactive substances. Holotropic Breathwork uses long periods of faster breathing, evocative music, and body work to activate and engage

the deep psyche. *Holotropic* means “aiming for wholeness,” and refers, says Grof, to states of consciousness that are oriented toward the whole of existence. It contrasts with *hylotropic* states of consciousness, which are states that are “oriented toward the world of matter,” or ordinary sensory awareness.

In both methods the aim is to powerfully stimulate the unconscious, to amplify its patterns bringing them into conscious awareness, and then to engage them fully, experiencing completely whatever the patterns are.⁸ Through the unrestricted engagement of one’s inner experience (lying down, eyes closed, inwardly focused), the patterns build in intensity until they come to a critical threshold. The same patterns will keep showing up in a variety of forms until a climax of expression is reached—some inner gestalt is consciously realized or some reservoir of pain drained—and then the pattern dissolves. The energy trapped in this pattern is released or integrated, and the psyche is then free to flow into more expansive forms of awareness. If the process is repeated many times, deeper and more elemental patterns begin to emerge. However basic or irreducible these patterns may seem at the time, they can be dissolved by undefended engagement. Once they are dissolved, new worlds of experience will open.

Grof has demonstrated at considerable length that the experiences that emerge in LSD-assisted psychotherapy and Holotropic Breathwork are essentially identical. The triggers used to activate the deep psyche differ, but the dynamics and potentials that emerge are the same and reflect, he thinks, the innate structures and capacities of consciousness itself. Because of this overlap in experiential content, I propose for simplicity’s sake to collapse these two methods and to refer to the states of consciousness that emerge using *either* of Grof’s therapeutic regimens as “psychedelic states,” intending the term in its generic sense of “mind-opening,” not its narrow sense of “involving the use of psychoactive agents.” While this usage is not ideal, the alternative, calling them “holotropic states,” is worse because “holotropic” is an awkward term that is familiar only to a very specialized audience. We need a third term here, something user-friendly and neutral with respect to method, but I’ve not been able to come up with a good one. Until someone does, I will go with “psychedelic.”

The longer I have worked with psychedelic states and spoken with others who have undertaken similar work, the more I have come to appreciate how deeply the therapeutic use of these states differs from their recreational use. Because this distinction is often

lost on even an educated public, let me emphasize it here. For deep change to take place in the psyche, it is not enough simply to awaken extraordinary experiences. Powerful experiences come and go and may amount to very little in the long run. For enduring change to take place, there must be a container for holding these experiences in conscious awareness and for engaging them completely until they exhaust themselves—both during the session itself *and* in one's life between sessions. If powerful experiences are brought forward from the unconscious but are not held in this manner, they will give but a temporary release from the patterns that bind, a passing transpersonal distraction from our aching condition of psychospiritual imprisonment. The therapeutic use of these states, therefore, aims at the complete engagement of one's inner patterns until those patterns dissolve themselves, and this takes many years.

The patterns that emerge in this work come from many layers of our being, most of which were not even recognized in the West until recently. Grof has shown that beyond those mapped in conventional psychodynamic theory are patterns that come from the womb, from previous incarnations, and from beyond individual human existence altogether. The patterns that bind may come from what Carl Jung called the collective unconscious or from even deeper in the evolutionary web. In this work we confront barriers to experience that are so foreign to our everyday consciousness that we cannot see how they are restricting us until *after* we have worked through them and broken through to what lies beyond.

Psychotherapists working with patients who are recovering a traumatic episode from their past know that beyond the pain of remembering exists a state of health and wholeness that will be realized only if the trauma is allowed to surface and be consciously reappropriated. The trauma has trapped their patients' awareness, holding it in a narrow orbit of pain or disfunction until the memory of the original event can finally be brought back into awareness and digested. Only then will they really be free to move on to new life adventures. Work in psychedelic states follows much the same pattern except that the "trauma" one engages often seems intent on unraveling not some problematic piece of one's life but the basic structure of one's entire existence. The patterns that eventually emerge as problematic are not just patterns of pain in any conventional sense but patterns that appear to compose our existence in its entirety.

One can imagine one's life without some specific pain or without this or that fixation, but it is considerably more difficult to imagine one's life without one's life. This extreme way of putting it drama-

tizes the dilemma that one confronts again and again in therapeutically focused psychedelic states. If you open deeply to the process, you engage the patterns that comprise your existence as you have known it. There is no imagining your existence apart from these forms, and yet they are being torn away from you. It is only after these patterns have exhausted themselves and you have been released into a new order of experience that you can begin to recognize the wholeness which they had been denying you. Piece by piece, layer by layer, patterns of conditioning are brought forward, crystallized, and dissolved, and as they are, new orders of inherent being emerge. A level that one is liberated *into* at one stage may become that which one must be liberated *from* at a later stage.

For this successive opening to take place in a productive, safe, and healthy manner, there must be a container for directly engaging the patterns of one's existence from whatever unknown depths they come and for following the experience wherever it takes you, however frightening or incomprehensible it is at the time. Creating this container requires something more comprehensive than what is usually meant by creating a good "set and setting." As with any sustained spiritual practice, this work needs to be grounded in the ethical discipline of right relationship, the physical discipline of caring for the body, and the mental discipline of critical self-inquiry.

In summary, then, this is what I think is distinctive about the therapeutic use of psychedelic states—the completely internalized set, free of outward distractions and totally focused within; conditions that intensify the unconscious and encourage the unrestricted experience of whatever surfaces; holding that point of engagement long enough and frequently enough for the patterns to come completely into awareness, reach a critical threshold, and then dissolve entirely; and finally, the systematic integration of these experiences into one's physical, mental, emotional, and social existence.

Like all long-term projects, this work has a rhythm to it. No one experience is as important as the trajectory of development that unfolds across many sessions. Any experience that emerges in one session has been prepared in the sessions that precede it and is simultaneously laying the foundation for what will emerge in subsequent sessions. Some sessions seem to be spent doing laborious spade work while others harvest the work of many months or years, carrying you forward into entirely new dimensions of consciousness. This pattern of intense cleansing followed by a breakthrough into a new level then followed by stabilization of insight and experience at that level repeats itself over and over again. No matter how extraor-

dinary or clear the level, it seems that there are always levels beyond even that. At whatever level one is working, this cycle of purification will be part of the rhythm of one's work.

Because each session experience is deeply embedded in a larger process, lifting a session out of its context isolates it from the larger pattern that grounds its meaning. *It is always the trajectory of the work that matters most, not individual experiences.* And yet in a book such as this, one cannot realistically include the entire sequence of session experiences but must pick and choose representative examples. This makes the task of using transcripts from actual sessions to illustrate specific dynamics difficult, and I will try to navigate this difficulty in several ways. First, in the chapters that follow I will be drawing primarily from my own experiences to illustrate the dynamics under discussion. Though less than ideal in some respects, following one subject through many layers of the psyche will itself provide a certain continuity of context. In this respect I see this volume as providing something of a methodological complement to Grof's comprehensive description of psychedelic experiences drawn from thousands of subjects. Second, I will be selective and introduce only those experiences that embody in a particularly clear way the dynamic under discussion. This will tend to give the impression that these processes are clearer than they in fact are, for we will be skipping over those sessions where the gestalts emerged in more fragmented and incomplete forms. Nevertheless, if the reader keeps this distortion in mind, the misrepresentation will not be serious.

The third strategy will be to allow a certain repetition into the narrative of session experiences. Repetition of the same theme unfolding at deeper and deeper levels across several sessions is an essential part of this work and must be part of the telling of its story. If we eliminate this repetition from our narrative entirely, we will tend to underestimate the depths one eventually reaches through this circuitous route. One of my concerns in this book is to expose some of the inner workings of these processes in order to allow others to better understand and assess the philosophical implications of these states. For this to be done, a certain amount of repetition must be allowed to enter the narrative. Finally, in a few instances I will take a different approach and consolidate insights gathered from many sessions into a single metanarrative, condensing an often circuitous journey into a shortened travelogue. Where the contents of the ideas themselves are more important than the details of psychological excavation, clinical context will be sacrificed in the interest in creating an overview of some of the territory covered.⁹

Just as there is a rhythm to the work that arches across many sessions, there is also a rhythm that characterizes each individual session if it is well managed. As in any therapeutic progression, there is only so much that can be accomplished in one day, even a good day. Accordingly, there is a rhythm of engagement that allows each individual session to be complete within itself while simultaneously being part of these larger cycles of unfolding. The same cycle of cleansing, breakthrough, and stabilization that characterizes the larger trajectory of many sessions also defines the curve of each individual session if it is well managed. As long as one is working at what Grof calls the psychodynamic and perinatal levels, the early hours of a session will be spent in painful confrontation. This purgatorial cleansing usually builds to a climax that, if successfully negotiated, culminates in a mini-death-rebirth experience followed by a breakthrough to positive transpersonal vistas. The remainder of the session will be spent in these spaces as one's education continues against an often ecstatic background.

In my experience, the nature of one's experience during the ecstatic phase of a session is shaped primarily by two things—the depth of cleansing achieved during the first phase of the session and the depth of the cleansing that has been realized in the whole of one's work to date. These two interact in a sometimes complex fashion to create the conditions of discovery that govern what unfolds during this phase. However profound the space one enters here, the next session will resume the cleansing process approximately where it stopped in the previous session, and the cycle will repeat itself. Deeper cleansing will result in a deeper death-rebirth surrender followed by a resumption of transpersonal instruction and initiation. What you see is always a function of what you are, or what in your heart you still believe you are. The more conditioning one has been able to let go of, the more open-ended are the possibilities that present themselves.¹⁰

The peak states of consciousness one enters during these precious hours obviously do not become one's new baseline consciousness in any simple or linear fashion. With persistence one's baseline does change over time, but far more slowly than one would wish. From a spiritual perspective, the final measure of the value of this work will be its capacity to bring about a *permanent* shift in consciousness, to free us forever from the prison of self-centered existence. If this is what one seeks, the emphasis in one's sessions will always be on purification until the mind can finally rest at peace in its "natural condition" months *after* a session has concluded.

Temporary immersion in powerful, revelatory states is part of the therapeutic cycle, however, and from a philosophical perspective the fact that these states are temporary does not diminish the truth of the insights that arise there.¹¹

Though I have been speaking of psychedelic states as states of *consciousness*, it is important to emphasize that they are also states of *body*. These states profoundly impact one's physical and subtle energy systems, for wherever one's mind goes, the body necessarily follows. Furthermore, to give the mind primacy here may be putting the cart before the horse, for these states are being elicited through physical mechanisms—either ingesting a psychoactive substance or hyperventilating for a long period of time. In both instances it is the body which holds the key that opens the treasure chest of the mind. Therefore, one could say that for these methods the rule is—where one's body goes, one's mind necessarily follows. While I will continue to use the vocabulary of consciousness in the chapters that follow, I want to acknowledge in the beginning that this is not a balanced description of these states. A more complete account would give greater attention to the fact that these states at every stage are being negotiated and integrated somatically as well as mentally. It is important to keep this fact in front of us at all times if we are to avoid interpreting psychedelic therapy in terms that emphasize the dynamics of ascent over descent, of leaving the body behind and fleeing into the transcendent divine rather than waking up inside the immanent divine.

The Project of This Book

This book explores the ancient mystery of death and rebirth, but in a way that expands the conventional categories. Usually this story is told as the tale of individual enlightenment. The spiritual practitioner withdraws from the world, turns his or her mind back upon itself and plunges toward its center. Sooner or later he or she arrives at the Divine within. But as Buddhism and many other spiritual traditions have pointed out, the story of individual enlightenment is saturated with paradox. On the one hand, who can deny that individual awakening occurs? The student who practices diligently makes progress while the one who doesn't flounders. And yet the cry of the awakened is that none of us is isolated from each other, that existential separation is an illusion created by our physical senses, that the world is marked by interpenetration at all levels. The paradox, then, is this. If all existence is ultimately united in the One, no

one can awaken alone. The very structure of our being does not allow such a possibility.

In order to awaken to our true and essential condition, we must let fall from us everything that we thought we were or thought we needed in the most fundamental sense. In order to reach this naked condition, one must go through a transformational process that the Christian tradition calls the “dark night of the soul.” The dark night is an arduous stage of spiritual purification in which the aspirant endures a variety of physical and psychological purifications, eventually undergoing a profound spiritual death and rebirth (appendix A). The starting point of this book is here, in the middle of the dark night. There are no shortcuts through this night but there are more and less efficient ways of moving through it. Some methods intensify and accelerate the ordeal while others proceed at a gentler, more gradual pace. Psychedelic therapy is an example of the former; it intensifies the purification process and thus concentrates the dark night. However, in ways that I did not understand when I began this work, it also has the potential to greatly expand the scope of the process as well.

As I was making my way through this night, undergoing the various trials that everyone faces here, my journey took an unexpected turn. Over the course of several years, I began to realize that my process was not being allowed to complete itself. Instead of continuing through to its conclusion, my death-rebirth process began to expand exponentially, to take in the experience of tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of human beings. Through mechanisms that I did not comprehend at the time, my individual death-rebirth seemed to become a catalyst for a collective transformation that was focused beyond my individual existence. Unable to control what was happening, I had no choice but to follow the process wherever it was taking me.

Where it eventually led me was into a completely new understanding of the interplay of the life of the individual and the life of the species. The explosion of my personal death-rebirth process into a metaprocess aimed at the collective unconscious shattered my frame of reference for understanding the dynamics of spiritual transformation. It took me years to assimilate these experiences and to comprehend their implications, years to surrender the assumptions that my Western education had instilled in me. Because I was a philosopher of religion and reasonably well read in the spiritual traditions, I had the assistance of many wise voices to help me make this transition, but the words of another can only partially prepare

one for the profound reversal of perspectives I was being forced to make. I am still finding my way about in this new territory.

This book explores the deep ecology of mind as it reveals itself in nonordinary states, particularly in psychedelic states. It attempts to describe certain dynamics of the death-rebirth process from a transindividual perspective, that is, with the emphasis placed on the dynamics of the species-mind rather than the personal mind, and by extension on that which cradles the species-mind. Deep ecology is a school of environmental thought that developed in the 1970s around the thought of the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Its central premise is that there is no absolute divide between humanity and everything else. Thus it seeks to de-anthropomorphize our view of nature and to draw us away from making human beings the ultimate reference point in debates about the environment. Deep ecology sees a human being not as a social atom independent of other life forms but rather as a node in a web of relationships that reaches out into and includes everything.¹²

By speaking of the deep ecology of mind, I want to bring this profound sense of the interconnectedness of all life to the center of psychological reflection. My core contention is that *in order to understand the transformative dynamics that sometimes surface in nonordinary states, we need to expand our frame of reference beyond the individual human being and look to the living systems the individual is part of*. Thus, I intend the title, *Dark Night, Early Dawn*, to point beyond the individual to the collective dark night that I believe humanity as a whole has entered, and to the interaction of the personal and collective nights. I believe that we cannot fully understand the exceptionally powerful experiences that many spiritual practitioners are undergoing today without understanding the larger historical context within which these experiences are taking place. As we approach what many believe is a critical stage in our collective evolution, our fates are increasingly linked.

One has only to look around to see that our situation is becoming increasingly perilous. Apocalyptic hopes and political denials cannot much longer mask the catastrophic environmental and social cost of our industrial triumph. Any clear-thinking assessment of the ecological facts should convince us that we have entered a time of unprecedented disruption of life at fundamental levels that will soon reach catastrophic proportions. While there is probably no avoiding this painful confrontation with our planetary limits, I think there is also an exquisite beauty to the opportunity we are being given. The more clearly we understand the deep structure of the events that are

overtaking our lives, the more we may be able ease the pain of the transition humanity is being called upon to make. The sooner we have the wisdom to begin making the right choices, the less pain humanity will have to endure, and what suffering is inevitable can be softened by at least understanding the significance of the historical pivot we are making.

Because I am an academic, talking myself in from spirit has meant trying to integrate the insights that arise in nonordinary states into a number of discussions. Each chapter that follows addresses a different area of research and reflection. In order to prevent the larger story from getting lost in the details, let me briefly outline the territory we will be covering and indicate how I see the pieces fitting together into in the larger project.

Chapter 2 is a short chapter that builds a bridge between my earlier work on reincarnation and the present book, using the concept of rebirth as a point of departure from which to make the pivot to the study of nonordinary states. My primary objective in this chapter is to show that Ian Stevenson's evidence for reincarnation, while being essential to establish the validity of rebirth in our current intellectual climate, is ironically both liberating and constricting our understanding of the spiritual domain and the nature of identity. I try to show why, in order to answer some of the deeper questions raised by reincarnation, we need go beyond his provocative cases and explore the deep psyche directly.

After the introduction provided in part I, the main body of the book is divided into two sections. Part II explores the deep ecology of death and rebirth as it shows itself in three different nonordinary states of consciousness—psychedelic states, near-death episodes, and out-of-body states. The overarching agenda is to achieve a synthesis of these three areas of research around an expanded understanding of the death-rebirth process. Part III builds upon this foundation to explore various aspects of what I am calling the field dynamics of mind.

Chapter 3 begins the pivot to nonordinary states by critically examining Stan Grof's concept of the "perinatal" level of consciousness. In Grof's model, the perinatal dimension is a level of consciousness that lies between the personal and transpersonal levels. I describe my experience of this domain and my inability to reconcile my experience with Grof's account. This impasse forced me to rethink some of the fundamental assumptions of Grof's model and to propose an expansion of perinatal theory that systematically incorporates Rupert Sheldrake's concept of morphic fields into his paradigm. This

exercise lays the intellectual foundation for everything that follows in the book.

Chapter 4 deepens the study of the perinatal dimension by taking up the most terrible nightmare humanity has ever dreamed, the nightmare of eternal hell. It examines the experiences of some persons who have nearly died whose near-death experiences took them not into the heavenly light that many have reported but into the depths of hell instead. Much less common than ecstatic NDEs, these “hellish NDEs” have recently emerged as an important problem in near-death studies, in part because hell is such an abhorrent concept to the modern mind. Hell is the greatest obstacle to seeing the life process as deriving from a loving and benign source. The specter of billions of souls plunged into extreme agony for all eternity is so horrible a vision that many contemporary theologians have simply rejected the concept altogether, and yet on the face of it, these NDEs seem to provide experiential support for the idea. In this chapter I set out an alternative understanding of these hellish NDEs based upon psychedelic experience.

This discussion of hell has implications that extend far beyond the narrow problem of how to interpret certain rare near-death episodes. Our cultural convictions about hell are a distillation of our broader beliefs about the role suffering plays in human existence, and I believe we are entering a period of history that will be possibly marked by profound human suffering. If the crisis of sustainability predicted by many ecological thinkers for the twenty-first century disrupts the world economy to the degree expected, humanity will soon be wracked by social convulsions that are historically unprecedented. Already some social theorists are describing these impending events as a “descent into hell.”¹³ If such a descent takes place, humanity will cry out en masse to comprehend the suffering that has overtaken it. If we can respond with only a technological answer that strips our pain of any deeper existential significance or offer only regressive theologies of divine retribution, we will deepen the crisis by rubbing the salt of inscrutability into our wounds. In order to maximize our chances for coming through this critical period of history successfully, it is important that we understand as best we can the underlying structure of these events, and part of this means understanding what this acute and terrible suffering may represent in the life of the larger being that we collectively are and the opportunity that it and we are being given to radically transcend our present condition. In short, if the human family is entering a collective descent into hell, then it is critical that we understand what hell truly is.

Chapter 4 brings Grof's paradigm into dialogue with the work of Robert Monroe, founder of the Monroe Institute and author of three books on the out-of-body experience. In this chapter I attempt to reconcile Monroe's cosmology with the cosmology that emerges from psychedelic work. Essentially, Monroe's portrait of extraphysical reality is a soul-centered vision, an atomistic, "Newtonian" vision of a spiritual universe populated by discrete souls. As such it is fundamentally at odds with the more holistic vision that emerges in extended psychedelic work. Because this transition beyond the individual soul is in some respects the fundamental pivot this book is trying to describe, let me say a little more about it here.

When consciousness is systematically explored in psychedelic states, the conditioning of mind tends to fall away in clusters. Some of these clusters concern time and our tendency to take our *present* life as our true identity. Other clusters concern space and our tendency to take our *local* experience as our true identity. My earlier book on reincarnation, *Lifecycles*, addressed the limits that time imposes on our sense of identity by exploring the causal patterns that stretch across multiple lifetimes. This present book primarily addresses the limits imposed by space. It explores that dimension of our being which we share with every life form that is alive at this very moment. While reincarnation is a demanding concept in its own right, I think that by itself it actually poses less of a challenge to the ego than confronting the true breadth of our being. Because it preserves our sense of existential privacy, it allows us the privacy of our individual evolution as we climb whatever spiritual ladder we find credible. When we open to the spatial breadth of our being, however, this privacy is shattered. In this reality, the world moves as one, and it is God's bliss to do so.

When one lets go of the separate self in time *and space*, there is no logical place where one can grab on to it again. From here it is a free-fall into the Divine. Some writers call this metareality the transpersonal mind, because it transcends our personal, autobiographical mind. When Grof calls it the holotropic mind, he is drawing attention to its inclusiveness, to the natural tendency of awareness to be whole within itself. Both these terms are semantically fresh and have the advantage of lacking prior associations that might distort their meaning. Their novelty, however, deprives them of a certain semantic power that words with a longer history possess. Because I want to use language that draws upon our long history with the numinous, I will call this reality the Sacred Mind. To experience Sacred Mind even briefly profoundly shifts one's sense of

identity because it gives one an entirely new reference point from which to experience the life process. Instead of experiencing life operating in pieces, here one experiences it operating in its wholeness, our many lives moving as one Life. From this perspective, Sacred Mind is the only mind in town. To awaken in any part of it is to begin to feel its presence in every part.¹⁴

Bringing these observations back to bear on Robert Monroe, when one's inner work deepens to the point where one begins to experience Sacred Mind, the working identity of the private soul is challenged and eventually shattered. Even a soul that integrates many incarnations is too small a construct to describe the expanded sense of identity that opens at this level. The task, therefore, of trying to reconcile Monroe's soul-centered vision of the universe with Grof's more holistic vision grew out of my struggle to navigate this particular experiential interface. It reflects my attempt to integrate a vision of the universe in which reincarnation is a fact of life with one in which the identity of the reincarnating soul is yielding to a spiritual identity that excludes nothing.

As one falls into the Divine, it is not just the private soul that is left behind, of course, but eventually all other dualities as well. This fall into increasing simplicity, luminosity and transparency has been described by many writers, who sometimes mark its stages by differentiating between the psychic level of transpersonal experience, the subtle level, the causal level, and the nondual level.¹⁵ I will not attempt to describe this entire journey and thus will not reproduce the full range of transpersonal experiences that emerge in psychedelic states. Rather, what I am concerned to explore is the inherent wholeness of life that prevents this journey into the Divine from ever being a solitary journey. If this book has a central theme, it is that *wherever one of us goes, to some degree we all go.*

After exploring the deep ecology of death and rebirth as it is enacted in these three nonordinary states, part III turns to explore the field dynamics of mind from several different perspectives. Chapter 6 takes up a concept central to many spiritual systems, the concept of karma, and proposes an expansion of karmic theory. Usually karma is described as the set of causal processes that operate through time to create the learning conditions of our present lifetime. Psychedelic experience, however, suggests that there is a second, less appreciated dimension of karma that operates through space. This simple but basic distinction will better help us distinguish patterns of collective karma from personal karma in the deep psyche and describe more precisely their subtle interplay in our lives.

Chapter 7 explores the field dynamics of mind as they manifest in the university classroom, of all places. As my inner work slowly deepened through the years, I began to recognize patterns of collective mental functioning operating in daily life around me. Because I am a teacher, one of the places I frequently saw these patterns was in my classroom. In this chapter I describe a variety of transpersonal phenomena that surfaced in my classes over twenty years and draw out what I think are some of the theoretical and practical implications of these phenomena.

In chapter 8 I expand the frame of reference to the species-mind as a whole and develop a line of thought on how the growing ecological crisis may impact the evolution of human consciousness. Combining insights from chaos theory, the study of nonequilibrium systems, and psychedelic experience, I consider how this global crisis may affect the collective unconscious and explore the possible mechanisms through which it may trigger a profound shift in the baseline of human consciousness. In many ways, this chapter represents the culmination of the book, for it outlines the larger evolutionary project that I believe all our individual efforts at self-transformation are part of.

After exploring the field dynamics of mind from these three perspectives, chapter 9 brings the book to a close by considering the fate of the individual in psychedelic therapy, or more pointedly, the fate of individuality itself. As one's experience of the seamlessness of Sacred Mind deepens, the ground that our individuality rests upon seems to become increasingly precarious and uncertain. The more we appreciate the many threads that are woven into the being that we are, the more one cannot but wonder whether there will be anything left of our uniqueness when these threads are completely unraveled. Thus I end the book asking, Does the death-rebirth process dissolve us entirely back into the Divine as some idealist philosophies have contended? Exactly what dies and what is reborn in this transformation? What is the fate of individuality in Sacred Mind?

The Philosophical Context of the Study of Psychedelic States

The proposal that nonordinary states of consciousness are an important source of insight into the nature of mind and one's identity is not new, of course, as it has been an axiom of Eastern and indigenous thought for thousands of years, together with the mystical traditions of the West. Modern Western philosophy has not accepted

this premise and has instead placed all its confidence in an epistemology based almost exclusively on ordinary states of consciousness. The ascendancy of science in the seventeenth century consolidated a long historical tradition, going back at least as far as Aristotle, which established the daylight world of sensate consciousness as the epistemological norm and the only true source of knowledge. And yet the legacy of science has been two-edged in this respect, for while it has encouraged an epistemology based almost exclusively on sensate states, its relentless self-criticism has also mercilessly exposed the weaknesses of such an epistemology, thus slowly drawing Western philosophy toward an encounter with the nighttime sky of the deep psyche.

Because the pivot to nonordinary states, and psychedelic states in particular, represents such an important shift in our epistemological commitments, I would like to briefly review some of the larger philosophical and cultural developments that have been moving us in this direction. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to describe these developments in any detail, but it would also be a mistake to say nothing about them. The turn to psychedelic states represents such an important realignment of our philosophical priorities that we must place it in its larger historical context if its true significance is to be grasped. Unless we do so, we will fail to appreciate the historical and cultural pressures that have been building in Western thought for many centuries and that are driving this initiation. I know of no source where this story is better told than Richard Tarnas's excellent book *The Passion of the Western Mind*. Widely regarded as one of the most discerning overviews of Western philosophy from the ancient Greeks to postmodern thought, it tells the story of the shaping of our intellectual moment in history with exceptional clarity and insight. In chapter 6, "The Transformation of the Modern Era," Tarnas weaves together the philosophical strands of the last four hundred years and illumines with compelling force the many layers of the intellectual crisis we have come to in history. Moreover, his personal familiarity with Grof's research allows him in the "Epilogue" to deftly situate Grof's work in this larger intellectual context.

The fundamental intellectual crisis of the contemporary mind, asserts Tarnas, is a crisis of epistemology. It is a crisis in our ability to know anything reliable about the world. Now aware of our marginal placement in an evolving universe of immense scope and age, of the inescapably interpretive nature of all human knowledge, and of the bewitching effect of all culturally embedded metanarratives, the postmodern mind experiences itself to be profoundly adrift in