



The Way of the Psychonaut: Encyclopedia for Inner Journeys

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PUBLISHED 2019 BY THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY ASSOCIATION FOR
PSYCHEDELIC STUDIES (MAPS)

An Essential Map for the Inner Frontier Review of The Way of the Psychonaut: Encyclopedia for Inner Journeys



Renn Butler

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS ever written about the human psyche and the spiritual quest, *The Way of the Psychonaut* is a tour de force through the worlds of psychology and psychotherapy, Holotropic Breathwork, birth, sex, and death, transpersonal experiences and mystical states, karma and reincarnation, archetypes, spiritual emergency, art, artists, and

higher creativity. Grof writes that the new understandings were made possible due to Albert Hofmann's discovery of LSD—the “microscope and telescope of the human psyche”—as well as other psychedelic substances.

He reviews the history of psychonautics, defined as “the systematic pursuit of holotropic states of consciousness for healing, self-exploration, spiritual, philosophical, and scientific quest, ritual activity, and artistic inspiration.” Grof believes that the craving for transcendental experiences, the motivating force behind psychonautics, is the strongest drive in the human psyche; its pursuit can be traced back to the dawn of human history, to shamans of the Paleolithic era. His view of psychedelics is both optimistic and cautious, writing that it is becoming clear that LSD “was a wonder child, but that it was born into a dysfunctional family.” Many therapists, let alone lay experimenters, were not conceptually prepared for the gifts of these unique medicines.

Reviewing the history of depth psychology, Grof outlines the contributions of Freud as well as the famous psychoanalytic renegades, the ideas they contributed, and where their theories need revision and deepening in order to bring them into accord with clinical observations from work with the powerful psychedelic catalysts. The problem is that Freud and most depth psychologists after him seemed to be blind to the bands of the psychological spectrum studied and emphasized by the others, and reduced those other bands to his or her own model and understanding. “Thus Freud specialized in postnatal biography, and with one small and short exception ignored the perinatal

domain, and reduced mythology and psychic phenomena to biology. Rank recognized the paramount significance of the birth trauma but reduced archetypal phenomena to derivatives of birth. Jung, who recognized and correctly described the vast domain of the collective unconscious, emphatically denied that biological birth had any psychological significance.” Of all the post-Freudian renegades, Jung's understanding of the psyche is, however, the closest to Grof's and needs the fewest revisions.

Grof believes that Freud's original direction was brilliant and correct, but that he came to wrong and often ridiculous conclusions by reducing the psyche to postnatal biography: suicide is killing of the introjected bad breast of the mother, religion is obsessive-compulsive neurosis, and so forth. Mainstream psychologists rejected most of Freud's ideas, but threw out the baby with the bathwater—they gave up the effort to understand the origin and dynamics of emotional disorders and assumed the “neo-Kraepelinian approach” (as outlined in the DSM manuals): a simple description of symptoms while giving up the search to understand their source and cause. Grof demonstrates how taking the exploratory quest deeper into the unconscious, to the perinatal and transpersonal domains, brings much more logical and believable explanations.

The importance of birth trauma and fear of death play an important part in Grof's understanding. He writes that birth and death are events of fundamental relevance that occupy a metaposition in relation to all the other experiences of life. “They are the alpha and omega of human existence and psychological system that does not incorporate them is bound to remain superficial, incomplete, and of limited relevance.” He suggests that the reluctance of most psychological schools to integrate the perinatal layer of the psyche is based on psychological repression of the terrifying memory of biological birth. After many years of research and an influx of revolutionary data, Grof eventually came to the conclusion that a radical overhaul is needed in our understanding of the psyche.

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His clinical discoveries regarding sadomasochism, for example, are intriguing. He believes that the primary focus of sadomasochism is perinatal, not sexual, per se. Sadomasochistic practices combine sex with elements of physical restriction, dominance and submission, inflicting and experiencing pain, and strangling or choking, i.e., repeating a combination of sensations and emotions that many people experienced during their birth. Similarly, his work with suicidal patients has yielded credible insights about both the impulse toward suicide and the specific choices of suicide to which people are drawn.

He writes that suicide is essentially a distorted and unrecognized craving for transcendence, a fundamental confusion between suicide and egocide—death or transcendence of the limiting and separate ego. Many readers will also be fascinated by Grof’s discoveries regarding the perinatal and transpersonal roots of wars, revolutions, racial riots, concentration camps, totalitarianism, and genocide. He is not offering a reductionist explanation, but simply adding—to historical, economic, political, and religious causes—the psychological and spiritual dimensions of these forms of social psychopathology that have been neglected in earlier theories.

Written in his late eighties, *Psychonaut* is possibly Grof’s greatest contribution to date. He has explored many of these themes before, but never in one place or delivered so gracefully. The commanding breadth and depth of knowledge is astounding, the tone of his writing easy and accessible, and the narratives brightened with amusing anecdotes, brilliant case studies, and intriguing personal accounts. Arguably one of the fathers of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, its most experienced practitioner, and deeply deserving of a Nobel Prize in medicine, he has successfully unveiled a new and sweeping paradigm in self-exploration and healing. The vast and useful knowledge in this book is sure to be an invaluable and treasured resource for all serious seekers.

Renn Butler lived at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California for over two years, where he met Stanislav Grof and Richard Tarnas and began forty years of original research in transpersonal psychology. He certified as a Holotropic Breathwork facilitator in 1989 and offers workshops in Victoria, B.C., as well as doing archetypal astrology consultations with clients around the world. His focus as an astrological counselor is to help clients understand and integrate the material that emerges in their psychedelic sessions. Renn’s first book, *Pathways to Wholeness, an exploration of the correlation between planetary alignments and psychedelic experiences*, was published in 2014, followed by *The Archetypal Universe* in 2018—and his upcoming book on the astrology of relationships, *The Divine Romance*, will be out this fall. Renn has a B.A. in English and Religious Studies and worked as a health care worker for almost thirty years.

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