

Stanislav Grof

SPEECH

on the occasion of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation VIZE 97 Prize

Prague Crossroads

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Dear President, Dear Ms Havlová, Dear Friends,

It is great pleasure for me to return to Prague, where I was born, spent my childhood, and obtained my basic education. However, the absolutely exceptional circumstances that have made me come to Prague this time are even greater pleasure for me than the visit to this marvellous city, which I deeply love. I would like to cordially thank President Havel, Ms Havlová, and the consultant team of the Dagmar and Václav Havel Foundation for awarding the VIZE 97 Prize for my work in the research of consciousness and human psyche. This is great honour for me and also great surprise after the 50-year struggle with the “public anonymity” in science, so eloquently described by Professor Vopěnka in his October 2004 address while he himself was receiving the VIZE 97 Prize.

An important reason why the VIZE 97 Prize means so much for me is my deep admiration and respect for President Havel, as an artist, philosopher, statesman with an extensive spiritual vision, and a man of exceptional personal values. This admiration is also shared by many of my American friends, who have told me several times that, at the present difficult times, they would like to have a president with the intellectual, moral and spiritual qualities of Václav Havel. And while travelling abroad, I’ve often had the opportunity to see that also numerous people across the globe share the same feelings. I cannot imagine any other award that would be more important for me personally. Today’s ceremony is held on President Havel’s birthday, and I would like to use this opportunity to congratulate him cordially on his anniversary and wish him good health, good luck, and satisfaction in the years to come.

My destiny seems to be to engage in researching the areas that spark significant controversy in science and society. My unconventional scientific career started here in Prague more than fifty years ago, when I, as a starting psychiatrist, enrolled as a volunteer in a test of LSD-25, lysergic acid diethylamide. Docent Roubíček obtained this fascinating experiential substance from Swiss pharmacological firm Sandoz. The incredibly strong psychedelic effects of this ergot alkaloid were discovered by Dr. Albert Hofmann, when he was accidentally intoxicated by it during its synthesis.

The research project of Docent Roubíček required the combination of the LSD effect with the exposure to a huge source of stroboscope light oscillating at various frequencies. This combination evoked a deep mystic experience in me, which radically changed my personal and professional life. It had such a great impact on me that the research of the heuristic, therapeutic, transformative and evolutionary potential of extraordinary states of consciousness became my life profession, mission and personal passion over the last fifty years.

About half of that period my interest was focused on the clinical research of psychedelic substances; first at the Research Institute of Psychiatry, Prague-Bohnice, and later in the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, Baltimore, where I led the last surviving official psychedelic research in the United States for several years. In the second half of that period, my wife Christina and I developed the Holotropic Breathwork method at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, thus evoking deep extraordinary states of consciousness by very simple instruments such as accelerated breathing, evocative music and bodywork. Over the years, we also worked with numerous people who experienced spontaneous episodes of extraordinary states of consciousness – psycho-spiritual crisis or “spiritual emergencies.”

The research of extraordinary states of consciousness (their important subgroup, across which I was

pushing the name “holotropic”) was, for me, a source of numerous surprises and conceptual shocks, requiring radical changes in understanding the consciousness, human psyche, and the nature of reality. After many years of the day-to-day encounters with “abnormal phenomena,” which the current science could not explain and the existence of which was at variance with its basic metaphysical presumptions, I arrived at the conclusion that the careful study of holotropic states and the phenomena associated with them, such as statistically highly improbable synchronicities, shows that a radical revision of thought in psychology and psychiatry is necessary. The nature and the extent of the conceptual changes required in these branches would look like a revolution that physicists saw in the first three decades of the 20th century, when they had to switch from the Newton mechanics to the quantum relativist physics. We could even say that this conceptual revolution is a logical complement of the radical changes that happened in physics many years ago.

Changes in understanding the consciousness and the human psyche in health and disease which we are forced to make on account of the observations from the research of holotropic states fall within several categories: This research showed the necessity to enrich the traditional model of psyche, restricted to post-natal biography and Freud’s individual unconscious, with two large areas – perinatal (which is closely related to biological birth) and transpersonal (mediating the experiences of identification with other people, animals and plants, and human and animal predecessors, as well as the experiences from the historical and archetypal collective unconscious).

Conventional psychiatry sees the beginnings of “psychogenic” emotional and psychosomatic disorders – those with no biological cause – in the child and infant age. Working with holotropic states, we see that these disorders have deep roots adjunct in the perinatal and transpersonal areas of unconscious. This finding alone might seem to be highly pessimistic, but is counterbalanced with the discovery of new efficient mechanisms that exist on those deep levels of unconscious.

In conventional psychotherapies the objective is to achieve the intellectual understanding of how human psyche works, why symptoms arise, and what they mean. This understanding will then form the basis for developing the technique that psychotherapists use for the treatment of their patients. A serious problem connected with this strategy is the surprising lack of compliance between psychologists and psychiatrists regarding the most elementary theoretical problems, and consequently the whopping number of competing psychotherapy schools. The work with holotropic conditions offers a surprising radical alternative – the mobilisation of clients’ deep intrinsic healing intelligence, which is able to control the process of health recovery and transformation.

Materialist science provides no space for any form of spirituality, and considers it fundamentally incompatible with the global scientific opinion. It views any form of spirituality as an expression of insufficient education, superstitiousness, primitive magic thought, or a serious psychopathological condition. Modern research of consciousness shows that spirituality is a natural and legitimate dimension of human psyche and of the universal order of things. In this context it should be stressed, however, that this applies to the authentic spirituality based on a direct personal experience, and not to ideologies and dogmas of organised religions.

New observations show that consciousness is no epiphenomenon of matter – a product of comprehensive neuro-physiological processes in brain – it is the fundamental attribute of existence, like the great spiritual philosophies of the East view it. As Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung has already shown, psyche is not enclosed in human brain, it permeates through all existence (*anima mundi*). Individual human psyche is an integral part of this cosmic matrix and, through experiences, can identify with its various aspects, under certain circumstances.

This new understanding of psyche involves important socio-political implications. Medical anthropologists have indicated that numerous physical differences that human groups show will disappear once the scientific research of *homo sapiens* permeates under the thin layer of epidermis; the basic anatomy, physiology and biochemistry are common to all mankind. Modern research of consciousness integrated this observation with similar findings in human psychology. Significant individual differences exist at the post-

natal biography level; the life conditions in childhood, adolescence and adulthood radically differ from man to man, from family to family, from one nation to another. However, these differences will start to peter out once the experience self-exploration in holotropic states of consciousness achieves the perinatal level. All members of mankind share the experiences of pre-natal life and birth; the differences in this area are individual, not specific for certain human groups. And once the process of the deep experience self-exploration achieves the transpersonal level, all differences will disappear.

Our observations have shown that people of all groups with whom my wife Christina and I together worked in various parts of the world – in Europe, India, Japan, Australia, South, Central and North Americas, Polynesia – had access to the entire collective unconscious, in terms of C. G. Jung, to both historical and archetypal unconscious, irrespective of their own racial, national and cultural membership, when they were in the holotropic state. These experiences often even overrode gender differences – many of the karmic, ancestral and racial experiences contained the experience identification with people of the opposite gender. Even identifications with other animal species occurred very frequently. This research clearly indicates something that conventional materialist science would consider completely absurd – i.e. that the entire human history and the history of life evolution are permanently recorded in an immaterial field, to which each of us has the experience access. Ervin Laszlo succeeded in providing a scientific description of such a field, which he has entitled Psi Field or Akashic Field.

Perinatal and transpersonal experiences have deep psychological consequences. When the content of the perinatal level of the unconscious appears in the consciousness and is adequately integrated, this leads to a radical change in personality. The individual will experience a significant decline in aggressive tendencies and become more tolerant to others. The experience of psycho-spiritual death and re-birth, and the conscious connection with positive postnatal and prenatal memories will reduce irrational urge and ambitions, and increase ardour vital a *joi de vivre* – the ability to rejoice at life and draw satisfaction from simple situations, such as everyday activities, food, making love, landscape and music.

The process of spiritual opening and transformation will typically continue to deepen, due to transpersonal experiences. The feelings of unity with universe and its creative principle lead to the increasing identification with the whole Creation, and involve the feelings of astonishment, love, sympathy and internal peace. The spirituality that stems from this process is universal, exceeds the specifics of religion, and is all-embracing; it recalls the attitude to universe, which we can find with mystics of all ages. It is very authentic and convincing because it is based on a deep personal experience; therefore it is able to successfully compete with dogmas of organised religions as well as monistic and materialist science.

People whose experiences are connected to the transpersonal area tend to appreciate existence and feel respect to all living creatures. One of the most remarkable consequences of various forms of transpersonal experiences is the spontaneous occurrence and development of the deep humanitarian and ecological interests and the need to share the common target. This is based on the nearly cellular understanding that the boundaries of universe are relative, and that each of us is identical with the entire tissue of existence. As a result of these transformation experiences, people typically deeply feel that they are citizens of our planet, and not of a particular country, or members of a specific racial, social, ideological, political or religious group. Clearly, this type of transformation would increase our chances of survival if it happens to a sufficiently large extent.

It seems that almost of us are participating in a dramatic race for time, which has not occurred in the human history ever before. Nothing less than the future of mankind and the destiny of life on our planet are at stake. If we apply the old strategies, which have caused the global crisis and involve extremely destructive and self-destructive consequences, we may be in for the extinction of modern civilisation and even of mankind. If, however, enough people undergo the process of the deep internal transformation and achieve a higher level of realisation, we may, in the future, deserve the proud name that we have devised for our species: *homo sapiens sapiens*.

In conclusion, I would like to express my deep gratitude to Christine, my wife, best friend and aide, for all her contributions over the years of research, which received such an exceptional award, the Vize 97 Prize, today.