SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY:

Understanding and Treatment of Transpersonal Crises
Proposal for Radical Revision of Psychiatric Theory and Practice
Necessary for Understanding and Treatment of Spiritual Emergences:

1. Vastly expanded cartography of the human psyche (including the perinatal and transpersonal domains of the unconscious

2. Roots of emotional and psychosomatic disorders reach deeper than to infancy and childhood, into the perinatal, prenatal, and transpersonal domains

3. New effective therapeutic mechanisms discovered on the perinatal and transpersonal level of the psyche


5. Spirituality as an important dimension of the human psyche and of existence

6. Consciousness is not a product of the brain, but an integral part of existence

7. Archetypal psychology and transit astrology are essential tools for the work with holotropic states
**Spiritual Emergencies in History:**

- Initiatory crises of shamans

- Overwhelming experiences of the yogis (Ramakrishna, Muktananda)

- Visionary experiences of the founders of the great religions of the world (Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed)

- Trials and tribulations in the life of Buddhist teachers (Padma Sambhava)

- Torments of the saints and Desert Fathers (St. John of Patmos, St. Paul, St. Anthony, John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila)

- Challenging experiences of famous mystics (Jacob Boehme, Meister Eckhart, Hildegarde von Bingen)
Spiritual Emergency:

• One of the most important discoveries of the research of holotropic states of consciousness was the realization that many intense episodes of these states currently diagnosed as manifestations of mental diseases – psychoses – are actually difficult stages of a process of spiritual opening.

• Properly understood and supported, they can be healing, transformative, and even evolutionary. They also have great heuristic potential. The appearance of symptoms has to be understood homeopathically – as a healing impulse, an effort of the psyche and the organism in general to get rid of traumatic imprints.

• My wife Christina and I coined for these states the term “spiritual emergency;” it is a play on words based on the Latin word “emergere” – to emerge. We often refer to the Chinese ideogram for “crisis” composed of “danger” and “opportunity.”
Spiritual Emergency: Psychosis or Transcendence?

- Transpersonal experiences occur not only in psychedelic sessions, but also during spiritual practice and in holotropic breathwork of normal individuals.

- These experiences, properly understood and supported, can be healing and transformative.

- This suggests that they are not products of a pathological process in the brain, but emergence of unconscious material; they are products of self-healing intelligence of the psyche and body.

- In 1980, Christina Grof founded Spiritual Emergency Network (SEN), connecting people undergoing psychospiritual crises with professionals who are able and willing to provide useful assistance.

- SEN started at the Esalen Institute, later moved to the International Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) and, after a period of independent existence, became the Institute for Psychological and Spiritual Health, associated with the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). It stopped functioning after the funding of CIIS was cut down; now it is being revived by the Grof Foundation.

- Filial branches of SEN now exist in many countries of the world.
“Differential Diagnosis” between SE and Psychosis:

- “Functional” (“endogenous”) psychoses are not medically defined
- They are not diseases in the same sense as medical conditions, such as encephalitis, typhoid fever, or uremia
- They do not yield any specific clinical or laboratory findings (blood, urine, cerebrospinal liquid, X-rays, brain microscopy, etc)
- It is questionable whether they should be referred to as “mental diseases“ at all
- Diagnosis is based on unusual experiences and behaviors that current theories cannot explain
- The attribute “endogenous” (generated from within) is meaningless
- It is very unlikely that a pathological process affecting the brain could generate the rich spectrum of experiences involved
Diagnostic Criteria for Spiritual Emergency:

- Good medical examination eliminating organic causes
- Biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal experiences
- Ability to see the condition as an inner process
- Minimum use of projection
- Communication style (articulate and coherent account)
- Capacity to form a good working relationship (trust)
- Willingness and interest to do experiential work
Triggers of Spiritual Emergency:

Physical factors:

- accidents
- operations
- extreme physical exertion
- fasting
- sleep deprivation
- childbirth, miscarriage, or abortion
- powerful sexual experience
Triggers of Spiritual Emergency:

**Psychological factors:**

- death of a child, close relative, or friend
- divorce, or the end of a love affair
- series of failures
- loss of a job or property
- unresolved psychedelic experience
- session of powerful experiential therapy
- other traumatic emotional experiences
**Triggers of Spiritual Emergency:**

**Spiritual factors (“technologies of the sacred”): intense practice without proper guidance**

- Shamanic rituals
- Buddhist meditation (Zen, Vipassana, Vajrayana)
- Practice of yoga (Kundalini, Tantra, hatha, raja)
- Taoist meditation
- Sufi zikr
- Kabbalistic practice
- Christian prayer, monastic contemplation, hesychasm
- Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola

The large array of physical, psychological, and spiritual factors that can trigger spiritual emergency have one common denominator, one common final pathway: they change the relationship between the unconscious and the defense mechanisms in favor of the unconscious
Types of Spiritual Emergency:

• 1. Shamanic crisis
• 2. Awakening of Kundalini
• 3. “Peak experiences” (Abraham Maslow)
• 4. Renewal process (John Weir Perry)
• 5. Crisis of psychic opening
• 6. Emergence of a karmic memory
• 7. Communication with spirit guides and ”channeling”
• 8. Near-death experiences (NDEs)
• 9. UFOs, close encounters, and alien abduction experiences
• 10. Possession states
• 11. Alcoholism and drug addiction
Theoretical Systems Useful in Spiritual Emergency:

- Roberto Assagioli’s psychosynthesis
- C. G. Jung's analytical psychology
- Stanislav Grof’s extended cartography of the psyche
- Eastern spiritual philosophies
- Archetypal psychology and world mythology
- Various mystical traditions of the world
- Natal and transit archetypal astrology
Shamanic Initiatory Crisis:

- **Visionary Journey into the underworld and supernal realms:**
- **Visit to the underworld** (attacks of evil spirits, emotional and physical ordeals, death, annihilation, and dismemberment)
- **Rebirth and magical flight or ascent:** solar bird (eagle, falcon, condor, Thunderbird), world tree, rainbow, bridge of bows and arrows, pole with notches,
- **Contact with animals** (real or “power animals”) and forces of nature
- **Healing** of various emotional and physical disorders (“wounded healer”)
- **Learning how to heal** (“energy medicine”)
Awakening of Kundalini:

- **Kundalini (the "coiled one," Serpent Power):** generative cosmic energy, feminine in nature, which in its dormant form has a representation at the base of the spine in the subtle body; it is symbolized by a snake coiled three and half times around the Shiva lingam.

- **Activation of Kundalini:** by meditation, specific exercises, intervention of a spiritual teacher (*shaktipat*), or for unknown reasons.

- **Activated Kundalini (shakti):** opens chakras and nadis, releases traumatic memories, and is generally conducive to healing, spiritual opening, and consciousness evolution, but can be challenging.

- **Kriyas:** energy and heat streaming up the spine, violent shaking, waves of unmotivated emotions, uncontrollable behavior (animal sounds and postures).

- **Other symptoms:** visions of brilliant light or deities, hearing sounds, memories from past lives, chanting sacred invocations (*mantras*), and assuming yogic postures (*asanas*) and gestures (*mudras*).
“Peak Experiences.”

• Walter N. Pahnke’s characteristics of peak experiences, based on Abraham Maslow and W. T. Stace:
  
  • Unity (inner and outer)
  • Strong positive emotion
  • Transcendence of time and space
  • Sense of sacredness ("numinosity")
  • Paradoxical nature
  • Objectivity and reality of the insights
  • Acquisition of wisdom in matters of cosmic relevance
  • Ineffability
  • Positive aftereffects ("self-actualization" or "self-realization")
Renewal Process (John Weir Perry):

- **Psychological renewal through return to the center:**

  - Experiencing one’s psyche as the center of fantastic events of cosmic relevance - battle between Good and Evil, or Light and Darkness

- **The theme of death** — ritual killing, sacrifice, martyrdom, and afterlife

- **Fascination by the problem of opposites**, particularly differences between sexes (identification with the opposite gender)

- **Journey into history** — one’s own, of humanity, to the original ideal state of paradise, to the creation of the world,

- **Striving for perfection** - trying to correct things that went wrong in the past, achieve a new world order

- Because of its depth and intensity, this type of psychospiritual crisis is **most likely diagnosed as serious mental disease**
Renewal Process (John Weir Perry):

- Hieros gamos, sacred marriage with imaginal archetypal figures (king and queen, Sun and the Moon), or an idealized person (karmic partner, soul mate)

- Personal apotheosis, raising the individual to a highly exalted status — a great leader, a world savior, or even the Lord of the Universe

- Symbolic representations of the Self: a source of light of supernatural beauty, precious stones, pearls, radiant jewels

- Spiritual rebirth that replaces the earlier preoccupation with death

- Vision of an ideal future — a new world governed by love and justice, where all ills and evils have been overcome

- Preoccupation with the number four, drawing of mandalas containing the quadrature of the circle

- Realization that the entire drama was a psychological transformation that was limited to the inner world and did not necessarily involve external reality
Theoretical Implications of Perry’s Renewal Process:

- The renewal process is described and discussed in John Perry’s books (*The far Side of Madness*, *Lord of the Four Quarters*, *Trials of the Visionary Mind: Spiritual Emergency and the Renewal Process)*

- The main themes of this type of crisis are identical with the motifs of royal dramas performed in many ancient cultures on New Year’s Day

- These ritual dramas were celebrated in a specific period of history when kings were considered gods ("archaic era of incarnated myth")

- **God/kings**: Egyptian pharaohs, Peruvian Incas, Hebrew and Hittite kings, Chinese and Japanese emperors

- This is a very compelling argument against the theory that these experiences are chaotic pathological products of diseased brains

- Democratization of the spiritual insight that an individual is of divine origin
Crisis of Psychic Opening:

- Increased intuition and occurrence of psychic phenomena are very common in SE all kinds; here the influx of paranormal information dominates the picture:

- **Out-of-body experiences** with verifiable autoscopy and remote viewing; it is particularly common in near-death experiences, including those of organically blind people (Ken Ring’s “mindsight”)

- **ESP phenomena** (telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychometry)

- **“Mediumistic” experiences** (losing one's own identity and taking on the identity of another person - body image, posture, gestures, facial expression, speech, feelings, and even thought processes)

- **Synchronicities** (intrapsychic experiences, such as dreams and visionary states, meaningfully connected with events in the material world of everyday life) (C. G. Jung)

- **“Psychoid” experiences** (psychological experiences events seemingly causing events in the material world (telekinesis, Poltergeist, UFOs))
Past Life Experiences:

- Experiential sequences that take place in other historical periods and often in other countries, but seem connected to present life (fears, attractions, idiosyncrasies, symptoms)
- Reliving is usually associated with powerful emotions and physical sensations
- The experience can provide accurate information about persons, settings, historical period, weapons, costumes, etc.
- Association with convincing sense of remembering and reliving something one has already seen (déjà vu) or experienced (déjà vecu)
- Remarkable healing potential (emotional and psychosomatic disorders and interpersonal problems)
- Extraordinary synchronistic links to persons in remote locations, who are unaware of the subject’s experience (Bell’s theorem)
Emergence of a Past Life Memory:

- **Before the karmic pattern emerges fully into consciousness**, its elements can manifest as incomprehensible symptoms - unmotivated emotions, strange physical sensations, and visions.

- **An emerging past life memory** interferes with everyday functioning and brings the danger of obsession with its content and irrational acting-out – seeking contact with a “soul-mate” from one's karmic past.

- **After the karmic memory has fully surfaced**, there is a problem of integration - to reconcile this experience with the traditional beliefs and values of the Western civilization.

- Denial of the possibility of reincarnation by both the Christian church and materialistic science presents **problems for both believers and atheists**, since their convincing personal experiences challenge their belief system.
Communication with Spirit Guides:

• Visionary experience brings an encounter with a being, who assumes the position of a teacher, guide, or protector (C. G. Jung’s Philemon, Alice Bailey’s and Roberto Assagioli’s Tibetan, and Helen Schucman’s Jesus)

• These beings are perceived as discarnate humans, suprahuman entities, extraterrestrials, or deities existing on higher planes of consciousness

• They take on a personal form, appear as radiant sources of light, or simply let their presence be sensed

• Their messages are usually received by direct thought transfer or through other extrasensory means; less frequently they come as verbal messages

• Danger of inflation
“Channeling:”

• The individual receives information from a source that appears to be external to his or her consciousness and communicates it to others (by words, writing, painting, actions).

• The quality of the channeled material varies from trivial and questionable to truly extraordinary; the latter can be seen as a convincing proof of the involvement of supernatural forces.

• Channeling can lead to serious philosophical confusion for an atheistic layperson or a scientist with a materialistic worldview.

• Believable contact with the beyond can trigger fear of insanity, particularly if it involves “voices,” a well-known symptom of paranoid schizophrenia.

• The channeling person faces the danger of ego inflation, if he or she interprets the experience as contact with a superior being serving a special mission or as a proof of one’s own superiority.

• Another danger is to believe misleading messages and to act on them. Charles Tart: “There is no guarantee that death improves intelligence or moral values.”
Near-Death Experiences (NDEs):

- A life-threatening situation with or without physical damage
- Life review (total or partial, regressive or progressive)
- Veridical out-of-body experiences (possible even in blind people)
- Passage through a tunnel
- Visit to hell (in rare unpleasant NDEs)
- Encounter with Divine Light, Being of Light, God
- Lessons about existence and the Universal Law
- Divine judgment or self-judgment
- Visit to heavenly realms (celestial cities, paradisean gardens)
- Reaching the “threshold between life and death”
- Return to earth and into the body
Changes Resulting from Near-Death Experiences:

- Deep appreciation for being alive, increase of zest, joi de vivre
- Opening to spirituality of a mystical kind that is universal, non-denominational, and all-encompassing
- Sense of kinship with other people and all living beings, concern for the future of humanity and the planet
- Heightened intuition and incidence of ESP
- A new hierarchy of values
- A radically different strategy of life, orientation on process rather than goals, *wu wei*, surfing through life
- Near-death experiences very frequently lead to spiritual emergences, because they abruptly confront unprepared people with transcendental realities
UFOs, Close Encounters, Alien Abduction Experiences:

Materialistic science offers four possible interpretations:

Actual visitation of the earth by alien spacecraft (highly unlikely)
Natural events and devices of terrestrial origin
Fraud and hoax
Psychotic hallucinations

New psychology offers two alternatives:

Alvin Lawson: the source of these experiences is the trauma of birth (unlikely)
C. G. Jung: these experiences are archetypal visions originating in the collective unconscious (Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies)
Parallels in Mythology, Anthropology, and Religion:

- Fantastic archetypal figures from the collective unconscious
- Glorious chariots of the Vedic god Indra or Helios
- Ezekiel's flaming machine from the Bible
- Abductions by elves and fairies
- Celestial and paradisean realms, cities of light
- Emotional and physical ordeals during shamanic initiatory crises and painful interventions in aboriginal rites of passage
- Experiences with UFOs and alien abduction are a frequent source of spiritual emergency (fear of insanity, danger of ego inflation, alienation). Answer of the aliens to Whitney Strieber, who asked why they chose him: “Your light was on.”
Possession States:

- **Serious psychopathology** (antisocial or self-destructive behavior, suicidal depression, deviant sexual impulses and acting-out, excessive use of alcohol and drugs)

- **Awareness of the presence of alien and hostile personified energy** (“evil entity”) in one’s body, exertion of great effort to fight it and control its influence

- **Manifestation in an experiential session**: “mask of evil,” contortions of hands, altered voice, violent impulses, and projectile vomiting (resemblance to Catholic exorcisms or native exorcist rituals), When the Impossible Happens: “Interview with the Devil”

- **Spontaneous manifestation of the demonic entity** in the middle of everyday life with destructive or self-destructive behavior

- *Properly handled this type of spiritual emergency can be unusually healing, transformative, and result in a spiritual conversion*
Alcoholism and Addiction As Spiritual Emergency:

- **William James:** "The sway of alcohol over mankind is unquestionably due to its power to stimulate the mystical faculties of human nature, usually crushed to earth by the cold facts and dry criticisms of the sober hour." The best treatment for dipsomania is religiomania" (*Varieties of Religious Experience)*

- **C. G. Jung in his letter to Bill Wilson:** "[The patient’s] craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God. The correct formula is therefore: "spiritus contra spiritum."

- **Alcoholics Anonymous** talks about “soul sickness” and “spiritual bankruptcy” underlying the addiction

- The spiritual nature of the problem is obscured by the destructive and self-destructive nature of the disorder

- To be successful, the treatment of addiction has to have a spiritual basis

- **Andrew Weil in The Natural Mind:** “Craving for transcendental experiences is more powerful than the sexual drive.” Naiveté of Nancy Reagan’s program Drug-Free America; “Just say No!”
Relationship between Addiction and Spirituality:

- Not difficulty to cope with mystical experiences, but a strong spiritual longing: craving for drugs or alcohol is unrecognized craving for transcendence or wholeness.

- The addict’s restless search for some unknown missing element or dimension in his or her life leads to an unfulfilling and frustrating pursuit of substances, foods, relationships, possessions, or power (Christina Grof in Thirst for Wholeness).

- Frequent use of metaphors related to thirst and hunger in the writings of various mystics (Psalm 42, Saint Augustin, Rumi, Kabir, Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, and others).

- There exists a superficial similarity between mystical states and intoxication by alcohol or hard drugs (sense of dissolution of individual boundaries, disappearance of painful emotions, and transcendence of mundane problems).

- Intoxication with alcohol or drugs lacks many important characteristics of the mystical state (serenity, numinosity, and richness of philosophical insights) and is ultimately unfulfilling.

- This experiential overlap is sufficient to seduce alcoholics and addicts into abuse; “hitting bottom” and spiritual opening is often an important turning point and beginning of recovery (see Bill Wilson).
Therapy in Spiritual Emergency:

Transpersonal psychotherapy
- Sessions of experiential therapy
- Holotropic breathwork (Christina and Stanislav Grof)
- Gestalt practice (Fritz Perls)
- Jungian sandplay (Dora Kalff)
- Work with eyemovements - EMDR (Francine Shapiro)
- Family constellation (Bert Hellinger)
- Journal writing
- Expressive painting (Michele Cassou, mandalas)
- Experientially oriented bodywork
- Dancing (Gabrielle Roth, Anne Halprin)
- Sport activities (jogging, swimming, aerobics)
- Acupuncture
Extreme Forms of Spiritual Emergency:

Possibility of acting out (inappropriate behavior in the public, infrequent aggression and suicidal risk)

Strong emotions, intense physical activity, lack of sleep, insufficient intake of food and liquid

Vicious circles: hypoglycemia and insomnia tend to activate the unconscious and perpetuate the process

Neglect of elementary hygiene (washing and bathing, brushing of teeth, feminine care)
Therapeutic Experiments in Treating Psychoses:

- **R. D. Laing**: Philadelphia experiment at King’s College in London (“antipsychiatric approach” - leaving patients alone, no interference and no support and even basic care, a la the Japanese *morita*)

- **John Weir Perry**: Diabasis and Chrysalis (no suppression with tranquilizers, trained staff, Jungian therapeutic interviews)

- **Stanislav Grof**: hospitalization in an open ward, administration of LSD to expedite the process, therapeutic interviews, support by trained staff and co-patients

- **Stanislav and Christina Grof**: twenty-four hour supervision, experiential work, therapeutic discussions (see the case of Karen in The Stormy Search for the Self)
Therapy of Extreme Forms of Spiritual Emergency:

- Facility offering twenty-four-hour care (John Perry's Diabasis and Chrysalis or Barbara Findeisen's Pocket Ranch)

- An alternative is a team of trained facilitators, who take shifts in the client's home for the time of the duration of the episode

- Availability of experiential work if desired

- Keeping a log describing the experiences and records of the intake of food, liquids, and vitamins

- Use of tea with honey, bananas, or another form of food containing glucose to ground the process

- Occasional use of minor tranquilizers or hypnotics to guarantee rest and prevent progressive activation of the unconscious
Potential Benefits of Psychospiritual Crises:

- Better psychosomatic health, improved self-image
- Increased zest for life - “joi de vivre,” “elan vital”
- More rewarding life strategy - “wu wei”
- Expanded worldview
- Reduction of aggression, rise of love and compassion
- Increase of racial, political, and religious tolerance
- Deep changes in the hierarchy of values
- Ecological awareness and concerns
- Heightened intuition and ESP
- Spiritual opening (mystical, universal, all - encompassing)
Consciousness Evolution and Human Survival:

• Global crisis is threatening survival of life on the planet (escalation of violence and greed, weapons of mass destruction, industrial pollution)

• Failure of the traditional strategies (diplomatic, political, economic, and military sanctions)

• This crisis has many symptoms, but one common denominator: it reflects the level of consciousness evolution of humanity and loss of spirituality

• Only profound psychospiritual transformation on a large scale can change the dangerous situation in the world
Global Crisis and Spiritual Emergency:

- **On the individual level:** loss of spirituality leads to an alienated, impoverished, and unfulfilling way of life and is conducive to addictions and emotional and psychosomatic disorders.

- **On the collective level:** the absence of spiritual values leads to strategies of existence that threaten the survival of life on our planet (greed, violence, intolerance, disregard for nature, plundering of nonrenewable resources, industrial pollution).

- It is imperative to **bring spirituality back into our individual and collective life**, recognize it as a vital aspect of existence, support and socially sanction activities that mediate experiential access to spiritual dimensions of reality.

- Development of **appropriate support systems** for people experiencing spiritual opening and spiritual emergencies.