

# Process Psychotherapy: Holotropic Breathwork and Alfred North Whitehead

## Psicoterapia de Proceso: Respiración Holotrópica y Alfred North Whitehead

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### Abstract

Stanislav Grof's Holotropic Breathwork has some important comparisons with Alfred North Whitehead's Process Philosophy, which develops a metaphysical framework that updates important concepts of the extensive Platonic tradition in Western philosophy with modern scientific discoveries. This paper explores a number of Grof's ideas and Whitehead's concepts that significantly corroborate each other. Grof's ideas follow from his extensive clinical work, especially his well-documented psychedelic research. There was a long hiatus in such research because of government prohibition, but younger researchers have revived the work, and it proceeds apace. The *first section* of this paper describes the Holotropic Breathwork process in some detail give the reader an understanding of what it involves practically and to provide a context for matters discussed in the next two sections. The *second section* offers Whitehead's Process model as an alternative to mechanical materialism. It offers support for important topics that Grof addresses in his Holotropic theory. Three of these major topics are (1) self-identity, (2) past lives and other non-ordinary experiences, and (3) spiritual emergencies. The *third section* of this paper considers the birth process in terms of Grof's theory of perinatal matrices and Whitehead's metaphysics. That consideration opens into a discussion of (1) the conjunction of mental and physical aspects of experience in Holotropic Breathwork bodywork, (2) the trajectory of the Holotropic Breathwork therapeutic process, and (3) transformation and spirituality.

**Keywords:** Holotropic Breathwork, process psychotherapy, Alfred. N. Whitehead, Stanislav Grof, transpersonal psychology

### Resumen

La Respiración Holotrópica (RH), desarrollada por Stanislav Grof, tiene algunos paralelismos importantes con la Filosofía del Proceso de Alfred North Whitehead, filosofía que desarrolla un marco metafísico que actualiza conceptos importantes de la extensa tradición Platónica en la filosofía occidental con algunos descubrimientos científicos modernos. Este artículo explora algunas de las ideas de Grof y conceptos de Whitehead que se corroboran significativamente entre sí. Las ideas de Grof se derivan de su extenso trabajo clínico, especialmente de su ampliamente documentada investigación psicodélica. Hubo un largo paréntesis en este tipo de investigación, debido a la prohibición del gobierno, pero investigadores más jóvenes han revivido este trabajo, y se procede a buen ritmo. La *primera sección* de este trabajo describe el proceso de la RH con cierto detalle, para dar al lector una comprensión de lo que implica esta práctica y proporcionar un contexto para los temas tratados en las dos secciones siguientes. La *segunda sección* describe el modelo del Proceso de Whitehead, como alternativa al materialismo mecanicista. Ofrece apoyo a algunos temas importantes que Grof aborda en su teoría Holotrópica. Tres de estos temas principales son (1) la propia identidad, (2) las vidas pasadas y otras experiencias no ordinarias, y (3) las emergencias espirituales. La *tercera sección* de este documento considera el proceso de parto en términos de la teoría de las matrices perinatales de Grof y la metafísica de Whitehead. Esta consideración se abre a una discusión de (1) la conjunción de los aspectos físicos y mentales de la experiencia en el trabajo corporal de la RH, (2) la trayectoria del proceso terapéutico en la RH, y (3) la transformación y la espiritualidad.

**Palabras clave:** Holotropic Breathwork, process psychotherapy, Alfred. N. Whitehead, Stanislav Grof, psicología transpersonal

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## Introduction

Stanislav Grof's Holotropic Breathwork has some important comparisons with Alfred North Whitehead's Process Philosophy, which develops a metaphysical framework that updates important concepts of the extensive Platonic tradition in Western philosophy with modern scientific discoveries. This paper explores a number of Grof's ideas and Whitehead's concepts that significantly corroborate each other.

Grof's ideas follow from his extensive clinical work, especially his well-documented psychedelic research (Grof, 2001). There was a long hiatus in such research because of government prohibition, but younger researchers have revived the work, and it proceeds apace (Roberts, 2013; Sessa, 2012). Holotropic Breathwork, like most psychotherapeutic methods, is difficult to assess, except clinically, but empirical studies have taken place (Eyerman, 1997). Whitehead, one of the premier mathematicians and logicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Einstein and others, conducted no empirical research, but developed theoretical frameworks to explain the results of experiments by others and suggest certain experiments for others to undertake.

Holotropic Breathwork (HB) is a singular example of process psychotherapy, although other therapies in the tradition of depth psychology exemplify elements of process thought. For example, significant materials in the annals of the Center for Process Studies, based in Claremont, California, treat depth psychology from a process point of view. Grof's work, however, remains the outstanding locus of process psychotherapy because of (1) how well its practice exemplifies major concepts of Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysics and (2) the commonalities in the development of Grof's and Whitehead's work.

Both Grof and Whitehead have major connections to William James (1916). Both share his concept of experience as the fundamental reality in the nature of the universe. Both share his pluralism. They share his humanistic characterization of psychology as an endeavor of achievement, aimed toward peak experience, rather than toward an analysis of dysfunction. Peak experience is the ultimate goal for both of them, which Grof calls spiritual intelligence and Whitehead calls Peace.

Whitehead and Grof both profoundly critique the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm and its attendant materialism. Whitehead calls fundamental error of the paradigm "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," and places in contrast to it what Grof calls the Holotropic perspective, the circumstance that the entirety of the universe is reflected in each of its parts. In this respect their cosmologies are identical.

Practically speaking, of course, Grof's emphasis is psychological while Whitehead's is philosophical. In the end result, however, this means that as complementary their systems extend each other and ultimately furnish an understanding of the universe that covers the spectrum from particular human experience to cosmology.

The *first section* of this paper describes the HB process in some detail to give the reader an understanding of what it involves practically and to provide a context for matters discussed in the next two sections.

The *second section* sets out some basic aspects of Whitehead's metaphysics. It begins by criticizing the materialist model of reality, whose problems became pointed for Grof in the course of his clinical encounters with patients' non-ordinary experiences (Grof, 1985). Whitehead's model is offered as an alternative to mechanical materialism with its picture of inert elementary particles as the basic realities of the universe.

Instead of inert elementary particles, Whitehead stipulates events, conceived as "drops of experience," as the basic realities. Events, unlike inert particles that are only externally related, actively reach out to past events and bring aspects of the past events' reality into themselves. Whitehead calls instances of reaching out by an event "prehensions" (from apprehend). Whitehead's events are also self-creating. The fundamental difference between Whitehead's events and the elementary particles of materialism is this process of self-creation that reaches out to past events and selects aspects of them to be ingredients in the event's self-creative process.

Whitehead's terminology of events, occasions, and prehensions speaks to the activity inherent in becoming, rather than the inert being of atoms in mechanistic science. Because the terminology is diverse from the materialistic categories that Cartesian-Newtonian mechanism has insinuated into our cultural perspective, it requires some study to master. A glossary by John Cobb, Jr., is a helpful reference for Whitehead's terminology (Cobb, 2008). Cobb has also used Whitehead's metaphysical perspective for developing "Process Theology," which brings avails some ideas as radical for religious thinking as Grof's are for psychology.

Topics that Grof addresses in his Holotropic theory can be illuminated by Whitehead's alternative to the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. Three of these major topics are (1) self-identity, (2) past lives and other non-ordinary experiences, and (3) spiritual emergencies. The alternative to Cartesian-Newtonian thinking offers a means to understand as realities phenomena that mainstream science dismisses as aberrations, such as mystical experiences, experiences of quasi-identification with animals and people who lived previously, and certain spiritual experiences that mainstream psychology dismisses as psychotic.

In the *third section* of this paper Grof's theory of perinatal matrices and Whitehead's metaphysics are considered together. That consideration supports a discussion of (1) the conjunction of mental and physical aspects of experience in HB bodywork, (2) the trajectory of the HB therapeutic process, and (3) transformation and spirituality.

Whitehead stipulates that events have both a mental and a physical pole. That conception eliminates the mind/body dichotomy that dogs cognitive science, and it provides a framework to understand the conjunction of bodily and psychic experience that often presents in the phenomena that manifest in the 'bodywork' phase of HB.

Whitehead holds that purpose, in Aristotle's sense of final cause, is fundamental to the trajectory in the process of becoming of events, which comprises the basic reality of the world. Holotropic theory sees purposive trajectory across human experience from the birth process to the process of effective therapy to the process of spiritual transformation. These two understandings complement and support each other, culminating in the purification of emotions that Grof calls healing transformation, and Whitehead calls *Peace*.

### **Part I—Introduction to Holotropic Breathwork**

Grof developed HB as an alternative to psychedelic therapy, which he had practiced extensively first at the Psychiatric Research Institute in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and later at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. In Prague Grof worked with normal experimental populations and mentally ill populations; in Maryland he worked with terminally ill cancer patients, alcoholics, drug addicts, neurotics and normal populations (Grof & Halifax, 1977). Subsequently, as Scholar-in-Residence at Esalen Institute in California, Grof turned to writing that has yielded extensive publication. Later at Esalen, Grof returned to therapeutic practice, deploying his research with the help of his wife Christina to design HB. HB avails numerous aspects of techniques they had observed at Esalen, which had become a proving ground of the human potential movement.

HB has five aspects: group process, intensified breathing, evocative music, focused bodywork, and expressive drawing. A group process of support and sharing provides the basic context of the work. A workshop begins with an informal lecture that sets forth some of the theoretical background and the practical aspects of HB. The process opens into an opportunity for the participants to speak to personal concerns, which fosters group rapport.

After participants have achieved some familiarity with each other, they are paired for "breathing" sessions. In the first session one person "breathes," and the other "sits." (In a second session the roles reverse). The "breather" lies on a mat under the attention of the "sitter." The session begins with a brief relaxation exercise, after which the breathers are instructed to intensify their breathing, making it gradually deeper and faster until they are moving as large a volume of air they possibly can. Recorded music plays and continues for the entire session. The music is non-specific, but evocative. It follows a trajectory that begins with activating music that especially emphasizes percussive rhythm. The trajectory moves through successive phases such as a movie sound track might, supporting the session but not leading it. The breathers keep their eyes closed or covered during the session.

By twenty to forty minutes into the session most breathers begin to experience non-specific magnification of their psychic processes. Breathers' experiences are varied and idiosyncratic. They may range from simply an intensified aesthetic sense to floods of imagery to visions. According to Grof, experiences may include enhanced ideation, vivid recall of events from personal history, mystical transport, descent into underworlds, boredom, or trapped 'no exit' feelings (Grof, 1988). Breathers may experience bodily feelings of unknown provenance, ranging from indistinct to vivid. The workshop facilitators (leaders) may offer the breathers opportunities to express their bodily feelings in harmless physical ways, such as pushing against resistance that the facilitators provide. Facilitators may also offer supportive physical contact as appropriate. After two to three hours of non-ordinary experience the breathers gradually return to more ordinary experience. Often facilitators' work with a breather's body assists the return.

During the breathing session the other of each pair "sits" for the one who breathes. Sitters are charged primarily with focusing whole attention on their breather. Sitters also serve mundane needs such as providing the breather with drinking water and tissue, or guiding the breather toward a restroom. All of this is done non-verbally. Sitters may help with bodywork.

Breathers conclude their sessions at varying times, according to their own inclination. A facilitator inquires to ascertain that issues and bodily concerns that arose during the session are reasonably resolved. The sitter then ushers the breather to a secluded area furnished with art paper and pencils, markers, chalk, paints, etc., and provided with drinks and snacks. The breather draws and/or writes according to whatever motivation obtains.

The entire session transpires with a bare minimum of talk, although breathers' vocalizations, even screams and shouts are expressly allowed. External

sensation is also minimized by darkening the room, in addition to the breathers' keeping their eyes closed or covered with eyeshades. The drawing is done in a lighted area, but even there talking is discouraged.

After all the breathers have concluded their session, and perhaps after a meal, the group convenes for a "sharing" session. The breathers are encouraged to share thoughts and descriptions about their experiences and their drawings. Sitters also are encouraged to share their own thoughts and observations. The facilitators may offer some observations on what participants share or on some features of the breathing session, but they refrain from interpretive comments on the sessions or drawings. The participants are urged to put their drawings up at home, so they can reflect on them and on their experience in the Breathwork session.

### **Part II—Holotropic Theory: Self and Non-ordinary Experience**

The mainstream science picture of reality as material bodies moving through time and space is only a mental abstraction from actual experience. This section of this paper presents an alternative scientific portrait of reality as processes of experiential events, necklaces stringing themselves from moments of experience. Whitehead calls these moments "actual occasions" or "events" (Whitehead, 1925, p. 93). He compares them to what William James calls "drops of perception" (James, 1916, p. 155). As fundamentally different from the atoms of materialistic science, these occasions are self-creative, not inert particles. Unlike material particles that interact only externally, a Whiteheadian occasion reaches out to past occasions and selects aspects of them that become ingredients in the becoming of the occasion. The selection that is ingredient may include a vivid recollection from a previous real life which, on the level of human psychological experience, is then felt as a past life experience.

The following discussion must necessarily omit major considerations of Whitehead's philosophy of organism, and it must also stop short of developing detailed accounts of how Whitehead accommodates Holotropic phenomena, which would require far more space than is available in this paper. The reader is directed to study of Whitehead's work in the volumes listed in the reference section at the end of this paper in order to develop the familiarity with Whitehead's philosophy necessary for engaging fully detailed accounts.

Reports of past life experiences, mystical experiences, and other Holotropic phenomena such as ESP and telepathy are dismissed by mainstream science because they do not fit its specification of data, which

presumes that material entities are the fundamental real things. Mainstream science's concept of fundamental entities has changed since nineteenth century physics from arguably material things, like atoms, to abstract mathematical things, like wave functions or multidimensional strings, but the materialist prejudice persists. It clings to the philosopher David Hume's pronouncement that only quantitative or experimental data has scientific value (Hume, 1748). Ironically, Hume began his acclaimed work, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, by saying that knowledge comes from experiences having "force and vivacity" (Hume, 1748, Section II). As his work progressed, however, Hume beguiled himself with the *hylotropic* spell of materialist science and proclaimed quantity and number to reign supreme.

### **The Materialist Model**

The materialist model of reality derives from visual sensory experience, which seems to show separate objects ranged against a continuous background. As modern science developed, the objects were deconstructed first into atoms, then nuclear particles, and finally mathematical abstractions. These mathematical abstractions bear little resemblance to the things of our ordinary experience. Even so, mainstream science has given these little bits of abstraction a peculiarly superior reality and regards them as determining what human experience is considered "real." The brain and its physiological processes have come to be regarded as more real than mind.

Many philosophical problems attend the mainstream science model of reality, but they all have been swept aside by a flood of material technological prosperity. Also swept aside are the spiritual problems spawned by industrial culture. Nor does this model of reality offer any understanding of past life experience or holotropic phenomena generally. It dismisses any idea that our personal past can extend before the time we were born, because in this scenario we only exist while we are material objects in time and space. It maintains that all communication requires a material medium, so that even our personal past in this lifetime is real only as a kind of recording on the physical medium of our brains.

### **Whitehead's Alternative Model: Events**

Though dominant, the materialist model is not the only one available for science. An alternative metaphysical model focuses on events, rather than material objects, as the fundamental realities. Like the materialist model, it originates in ancient Greek philosophy.

But instead of little atoms of material, it characterizes the process of becoming and perishing, which lies at the heart of individual experiential events, as the fundamental reality. Leibniz, who invented calculus independently and at the same time as Newton, spoke to aspects of it. In the twentieth century, Alfred North Whitehead's cosmology presents it comprehensively (Whitehead, 1929).

Abner Shimony is a physicist especially known for his investigation of *entanglement*, the critical phenomenon in quantum physics whereby 'particles' separated by distances that, according to relativity theory, are too great for communication nonetheless communicate. Shimony applauds Whitehead for offering a model that derives the notion of energy in physics from the complex emotional and purposeful energy of living creatures, instead of the materialist explanation that complex human energy can be reduced to the simple kind of energy that powers machines. Whitehead's model, Shimony says, offers "the possibility of integrating the mind into a scientific picture of the world" and makes "the unification of physics and psychology somewhat less remote" than does the materialistic model (Shimony, 1993, pp. 320-1).

Mae-Wan Ho further develops the phenomenon of entanglement to make a comprehensive statement about the integration of physics into biology as a means to understand the unification of the two disciplines with the psyche, conceived in terms of reality manifest as:

(...) a truly participatory, creative universe. Just as the organism is ever-present to itself during its entire life history, and all other individualities are ever-present to it, the universe is ever-present to itself in the universal duration where creation never ceases by the convocation of individual acts, now surfacing from the energy substrate, now condensing to new patterns, now submerging to re-emerge in another guise.

Reality is thus a shimmering presence of infinite planes, a luminous labyrinth of the active now connecting 'past' and 'future,' 'real' and 'ideal,' where potential unfolds into actual and actual enfolds to further potential through the free action and intention of the organism. It is a sea awash with significations, dreams and desires. This reality we carry with us, an ever-present straining towards the future. The act is the cause; it is none other than the creation of meaning, the realization of the ideal and the consummation of desire. (Ho, 2008, pp. 334-5).

## A Motion Picture Analogy

The analogy of a moving picture will illustrate Whitehead's concept of events. Consider that events are like frames in a film. In a film the illusion of movement arises from a succession of "still" frames. To deploy the model a little further, reorient from the film in the projector to the flashes on the screen. Each flash is an independent burst of light, but threads of continuity run through the flashes of frames. Those threads of continuity depend materially on the film, but the film's continuity and coherence ultimately depend on the director's creativity.

A singular difference between the film and the director is that the film is organized by the director, but the director is self-organizing. Self-organization is one of the most important scientific understandings to emerge in the latter twentieth century. Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) won a Nobel Prize in 1977 for work in thermodynamics that led Erich Jantsch to call him "catalyst of the self-organization paradigm" (Jantsch, 1980, p. v).

Deploying the model further, consider the director as a series of flashes. Next, think of the thread of continuity that runs through the series of flashes that comprise the psycho-mental aspect of the director as the *self* of the director. Then, take the analogy one step further and consider yourself as a self-organizing series of occasions exhibiting the thread of continuity that lies at the core of your feeling of *self*. Finally, consider yourself as a self-produced movie, playing along and interweaving with myriad other self-produced movies, all together comprising the entire happening of the universe. Contrast this with the materialist science model of the universe as an enormous molded salad made from fruit pieces that are so dried out they are only mathematical descriptions of themselves and which slither about in a spatial-temporal gelatin that is purely conceptual. The little particles of materialist reality are opaque. They interact only by sliding against each other. Whiteheadian events are transparent. Looking into any one of them reveals all the other events that have ever taken place in the history of the universe.

## Some Aspects of an Event

For Whitehead, an event begins as a desire to become that is a *creatio ex nihilo*—creation from nothing. Classical Christian theology endorses *creatio ex nihilo*, but sees it as a Divine capacity only. Whitehead's use of the concept favors Buddhism, in that self-creation is suggested as the defining capacity of every event. A classic Zen Buddhist question addresses the

metaphysical point by asking, “Who were you before you were born?” The only feasible response is that one becomes by virtue of one’s own thirst (Suzuki, 1962, p. 94 ff) to be, not as a consequence of something other than oneself. And then Zen undertakes to appreciate that the self is nothing.

By establishing self-organizational desire to become as the fundamental actuality of an event, Whitehead’s metaphysic supports the preeminent role of the self in HB. Neither expert therapist nor psychological theory can discover the crux of a person’s difficulties as surely as the person experiencing them. A good therapist can support and facilitate healing, but the capacity for self-healing is ultimately the capacity for self-creation.

An event begins as a desire to become, but becoming can only be realized by becoming *something*. There are many aspects of the process of becoming, but central to the process are the objects Plato called “ideas.” Ideas range from the simple things thought of as sense perceptions (such as ‘red’) to very complex things like justice. They are the things desire reaches for to make itself with. Desire’s reaching is a sort of feeling. Whitehead calls the reaching out a ‘prehesion.’ The desire to become reaches out to all ideas in all the ways and in every combination of ways that they have ever happened in the history of the universe. Simultaneously, the desire reaches out to all the ideas that might ever happen in all the ways that they might happen. (This capacity toprehend possibilities is the source of genuine novelty. Without it future events could do nothing more than reshuffle the past).

While doing all this in an interval too small to have yet become time, the desire to be arranges this myriad of ideas in a way that pleases it most, by bringing some closer in feeling, some further, or even ruling some out. (This may seem like a lot to do in an interval shorter even than fleeting, since even the capacity of computers for executing billions upon billions of actions per second is a very small fraction of what we’re expecting of an event. The discoveries of quantum physics, however, assure us that activity on this scale happens all the time, so any fuss over it can be saved for metaphysical nit-picking). When the arrangement is finally satisfying, the desire to be instantly becomes that satisfaction, making it a felt reality, instead of just a collection of ideas. Having done this, the desire to become immediately perishes, but in perishing the something desire made itself into persists as a reality that offers itself to all subsequent events. It becomes, as Whitehead says, “objectively immortal.”

The concept of objective immortality provides a metaphysical support for a scientific perspective that can comprehend the vivid reality of past life experiences, according to the following explanation: A life is a series of events, where each successive event

brings into its own identity the previous, objectively immortal, events in the series in a way that reinforces a defining thread of personal identity for the series. I live in the one event that is the present moment in the series of myself. All the previous moments of myself, like earlier frames in a movie, have become and perished into objective immortality, but my sense of personal self depends on ‘prehending’ those moments preferentially over all the other moments that have happened in the universe. Otherwise, I wouldn’t know who I was when I woke in the morning. This strength of this preferential prehension is what gives vivacity to my sense of being a person.

### Self-identity and Inheritance

Just as I prehend the series of event-moments that make up my own past, I can prehend series of past event-moments of other lives, because all the events in the history are available to the prehension of a present event. As events that have become objectively immortal, the event-moments of any previous life in the universe are as real as my own. Thus, they can be felt with a degree of force and vivacity approximating the way I feel myself. A question of psychological interest is why I should feel a particular past life with a force comparing to the way I feel my own. That, however, is not a question to be answered theoretically. It is a question to be answered by personal exploration, which is one of the things HB is all about. My involvement with a past life could be compared to my immersion in an old movie. The old movie is not me now, but my emotional involvement brings it into my life, and all its drama, suspense, or travail becomes mine to work through: it lives in me. Why am I involved with a particular past life? Why do I choose to watch a particular old movie, especially one that I have watched before?

Whitehead uses the term “inheritance” to describe the particular selection an event makes from past events. It is critical to personal coherence that the series of events comprising a particular person exhibits a focused chain of inheritance. Psychologically, self-identity depends on this focus. Self-identity can be flexible enough to support feelings of deep involvement with other person’s lives, even to the extent that other person’s lives can become as important to us as our own, even to the point that we may be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others. Those other lives may be the lives of persons in the present or lives in the past that embody important ideals.

If self-identity loosens too much, however, a pathology of codependence may arise, or multiple personality, or even psychosis. Sanity and psychopathology might be understood in terms of this model by anal-

ogy to the difference between a well-crafted movie and one that is a haphazard assemblage of frames.

Whitehead's model provides credibility for Grof's concept of spiritual emergency (Grof & Grof, 1989) by affirming the reality of things prehended. A perception, for example, of a demon that is labeled clinically as a hallucination is not an illusion. It is a reality a person simply cannot integrate appropriately into present experience, but it is felt as a reality because it is a reality. The clinician who dismisses the reality is pulling the rug out from under someone who is already off balance. Helpful and effective therapeutic approaches accept and facilitate exploration of reality as it is perceived.

Whitehead's insistence that all a person's experiences are real in a fundamentally important way, regardless of whether the person can understand and explain them conventionally, affords the means to put the great varieties of non-ordinary experiences on firm epistemological footing. Whitehead's metaphysic provides a basis for validating the felt reality of past life experiences, as well as felt realities such as experiences of animal life, or of any series of events that strings a thread of identity in the universe, short or long, vermin or vertebrate, plant or planetary.

### Part III—Holotropic Breathwork and the Birth Process

Stanislav Grof's major contribution to the development of depth psychology is his theory of Basic Perinatal Matrices (BPM) (Grof, 1985, pp. 102 ff.) HB as a therapeutic process reflects Grof's theory in a number of important ways that yield additional useful comparisons with Whitehead's thinking.

Grof's BPM theory characterizes four phases of the normal physiological birth process. The first phase is the period of a baby's *in utero* existence from late gestation to the beginning of labor. This phase is by far the longest temporally. The second phase is the period from the beginning of labor (contractions) until the cervix opens sufficiently to permit the baby's passage. The third phase is the baby's passage through the birth canal. The final BPM phase is the baby's emergence.

Grof associates a matrix of possibilities with each phase. Each matrix includes a range of phenomena, including the potential mechanical and medical exigencies of the phase, varieties of both normal and abnormal emotional experience, and archetypal themes. Interactions between the possibilities potentially influence (as ingredients in Whitehead's terminology), but do not determine, developments later in life.

Space permits only one example here, in this case regarding the second phase, BPM II. This phase finds the baby in a very tight situation: the musculature of the uterus is contracting, pressing in, and the way out is not passable, because the cervix is not yet open. The relative normality or abnormality of this experience depends partly on its duration, but a variety of non-normal medical and physiological factors also come into play. Emotionally the baby might experience feelings of being trapped or stuck. Classic literary examples of relevant archetypes include Sartre's *No Exit* (Sartre, 1958) or Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* (Poe, 2012). Grof suggests that trauma concerning BPM feelings of no exit may subsequently play a role in respect to what is clinically described as endogenous depression (Grof 1985, p. 103).

Three considerations about the therapeutic process of Breathwork in comparison to Whitehead's thought bear discussion here:

- (1) The conjunction of mental and physical aspects in HB bodywork.
- (2) The trajectory of the HB therapeutic process.
- (3) Transformation and spirituality.

### Bodywork

Whitehead's conception of mental and physical as polarities avoids dilemmas that arise from failing to see that that mind and body are abstractions, rather than concrete actualities. Whitehead calls this failure *the fallacy of misplaced concreteness* (Whitehead, 1925, p. 51). Grof recognizes a variety of this fallacy in psychotherapy that operates exclusively in the realm of verbal abstractions and believes that only the mind of the patient is the concern of therapy. In some psychotherapeutic situations the therapist is even explicitly forbidden to touch the body of the client under penalties of ethical transgression.

In a HB session a person may sometimes feel stuck emotionally. Inquiry will often reveal that these feelings are accompanied by bodily discomfort. Finding this, a facilitator will hold against that place in the body or buttress it. The facilitator will then ask the person to take a few concerted breaths and then push as long and forcefully as possible against the facilitator's resistance. According to Grof, the results of this simple procedure can be remarkable, as can supportive bodywork (Grof & Grof, 2010, pp. 37-45). A breather, upon exhausting the stamina of pushing and letting go mechanically, may experience a profound sense of emotional release and be flooded with memories of past trauma.

HB understands the witness of the body in emotion and trauma to be as important as the witness of the body in perception that Whitehead recognizes (Whitehead, 1927, pp. 50-1). Therapeutically HB can break open a conventional course of psychotherapy that is stuck, providing a bounty of new material and ideas and insights to work with. Bodywork complements other aspects of HB (such as music and inner focus) that enhance perception deeper than normal sensory perception, which is vitally important to the working of sacred rituals like the Sun Dance of the American Plains Indians.

## Trajectory

The significance of trajectory in HB compares to Whitehead's emphasis of process. An entire HB workshop has a trajectory. A Breathwork session within a workshop has a trajectory. Even a bodywork instance within a session has a trajectory. In each case these trajectories reflect the birth process, which seems to exemplify the *process of becoming* that Whitehead describes (Whitehead, 1929, p. 35). The process of becoming, in its most basic description, begins with a compass of all that has come before and all that might be, succeeds to forge a unique individual, and then perishes into an immortal possibility for all that can henceforth become. The trajectory of a workshop constantly appeals to perception of a less distinct character than ordinary sensation.

A workshop's trajectory begins with the participants to some extent unconsciously becoming a group. The process elicits the perceptual mode underlying social behaviors, which engenders feelings of comfort and community. Communal coherence helps participants feel support that assures them of safety, so they can let themselves go as deeply into their inner reaches as they will.

In the Breathwork session itself the music describes a trajectory that supports inner journeying. Played at quite high volume, the music also provides a sonic density that envelops random noises and spontaneous vocalizations participants sometimes make. It works to minimize distraction due to these sounds. The music is chosen to be evocative, but not evocative of any particular feeling. The music also is only instrumental or without recognizable words.

The music begins with activating pieces that heighten and intensify experience through drumming, pronounced rhythm, and the like. After the first phase of music has energized the session, the music takes a turn further out, to some strangeness, the slightly unusual, etc. Following this phase the music becomes energetic, emotionally open, and invigorating. Finally

the opening continues and broadens to beauty, relaxation, and resolution.

The trajectory of the music reflects aspects of the birth process: Developing intensity, a time of tensioning uncertainty, then opening and resolution. Individual episodes of bodywork also exhibit this trajectory: Building, pushing, then letting go and relaxing. The trajectory mimics the peristaltic contractions of labor and also the movement of the overall birth process from quickening to tightening, squirming and pushing, and then finally opening.

With respect to the Breathwork session's process music functions in two ways: (i) as a vehicle of beauty, seeking to promote "the internal conformation of the various items of experience with each other, for the maximum production of effectiveness," (Whitehead, 1933, p. 341) and (ii) as a means of emphasizing perception deeper than ordinary, which plays an important role in procuring the internal conformation Whitehead speaks to.

The process of becoming of the actual occasion from an external point of view is temporally finite and objective, but internally it is timeless. We can describe the trajectory of process objectively as we have done here, but it is interesting that one of the common reports people make when they are approached at the end of a Breathwork session that may have lasted three or four hours is that they thought perhaps an hour at most had elapsed.

## Transformation and spirituality

To describe the process of an actual occasion as only a process of becoming is elliptical. Fully spoken to, the process is a combination of becoming and perishing. On the scale of human life the process is birth and death. But within the macro process of human life the micro process of human birth is an analogous process of becoming and perishing. To be born into the common human world is simultaneously to die to the womb. One of the fundamental spiritual events is rebirth—to be born again: The old self perishes and the new self is reborn. The idea that rebirth echoes birth provides one of the basic underpinnings of Grof's perinatal (BPM) model, namely that a person later in life can again have an experience comparable in force to the original impact of birth.

HB aims at self-transformation through self-discovery. The most important aspect of self-discovery is uncovering the experiences or traumas in one's history that constrain one's life. Post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) is a classic instance. Self-discovery can be aided by intellect, but the crux of self-discovery is re-experiencing the emotional nature of past experiences.

HB theory does not propound any dogma about particular places one must traverse on the path of self-discovery. The theory maintains that the singular expertise regarding the traumas that constrain a person is the person's own expertise (Grof, 2000, p. 182). Analogously, an *actual occasion* could be said to be the unique expert in its own becoming.

HB theory suggests that a person's present behavior and feelings could not be affected by past trauma unless the person was in touch with that trauma in some causally important way. The person's contact with past trauma may be called unconscious, but that term must not be taken to imply that the trauma is not really availed in each repetition of the person's process of becoming.

Whitehead stipulates that each actual occasion is not passive in its process of becoming, but it actively derives itself from its history:

The individual, real facts of the past lie at the base of our immediate experience in the present. They are the reality from which the occasion springs, the reality from which it derives its source of emotion, from which it inherits its purposes, to which it directs its passions. (Whitehead, 1933, p. 361).

The basic therapeutic strategy of HB is simply to facilitate a person's turning inward. Turning inward, one can experientially uncover one's entire history, and even the entire experiential history of the universe. From the ordinary point of view this is an extraordinary claim, but it parallels the claim Whitehead makes for the process of every actual occasion.

HB is said to facilitate revisiting trauma, among other aspects of one's history, but there is an important difference between suffering the original trauma and revisiting it in the context of HB. In the original traumatic situation the person experienced real danger. In the therapeutic setting of HB revisiting trauma takes place in context of profound emotional and physical safety (Grof & Grof, 2010, p. 47 ff.): This is the essence of catharsis and the fundamental tool of transformation.

The transformation HB aims to facilitate ultimately leads to the kind of experience Whitehead calls *Peace*,

(...) a positive feeling which crowns the 'life and motion' of the soul. It is hard to define and difficult to speak of. It is not a hope for the future nor is it an interest in present details. It is a broadening of feeling due to the emergence of some deep metaphysical insight, unverballed and yet momentous in its coordination of values. Its first effect is the removal of the stress

of acquisitive feeling arising from the soul's preoccupation with itself. Thus Peace carries with it a surpassing of personality...Its emotional effect is the subsidence of turbulence which inhibits. More accurately, it preserves the springs of energy, and at the same time masters them for the avoidance of paralyzing distractions. (Whitehead, 1933, p. 367).

## Conclusion

Stanislav Grof and Alfred North Whitehead share a legacy in the work of William James (1916). While Grof is considered a founder of Transpersonal Psychology, its roots extend back through Abraham Maslow's Humanistic Psychology (Maslow, 1968) to James's work (Hartelius, Rothe, & Roy, 2013, pp. 7-8). James was the first psychologist to investigate the effect of a psychedelic substance (nitrous oxide gas) and its facilitation of mystical experience. He also established the psychological importance of group process, specifically the support group. It was Maslow who nominated Grof's coinage of "Transpersonal Psychology" to designate the fourth force in psychology. Depth psychology was first and behaviorism second. The third force brought human values to the development of psychology, thus the term "humanistic." The fourth force brought spiritual values and yielded Transpersonal Psychology.

The thread from James and his successors to Maslow and Grof is the idea of psychology as a means to self-understanding for achievement and excellence, not just a means of addressing deficiency or dysfunction. Ultimately the thread of self-understanding and excellence traces back through Aristotle and Plato to Socrates's concern for *arête* (excellence).

Whitehead's notable inheritance from James is the stipulation that our experience grows "by buds or drops of perception" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 105). Whitehead drew on this idea from James to characterize the events that are the fundamental actualities in his metaphysical scheme. James's focus on self-development echoes in Whitehead's designation of self-creation as the crux of the process of becoming.

Research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy is notoriously difficult, because of the myriad of factors involved. No research has ever shown that any particular theoretical type of psychotherapy is more effective generally than any other. What is most important is the quality of the patient-therapist relationship, a conclusion replicated repeatedly since the classic study of Garfield & Bergin (Garfield & Bergin, 1978, p. 15). Significant regard for the patient, client, or participant

seems very important in this respect. Grof's work emphasizes this.

Whitehead's importance for characterizing a process psychotherapy is twofold. First, he incorporates the discoveries of modern science into a metaphysics that comprehends the entire development of Western philosophy and correspondences with Eastern philosophy. Second, he brings physics, and by implication its sister sciences, under the rubric of a generalized psychology (Shimony, 1993, p. 320).

Empirical research remains mainly only a prospect for Holotropic Breathwork. Empirical psychedelic research that can continue Grof's original work now proceeds with some momentum. In the meantime, the classical value of theoretical research is an important contribution to understanding. This paper's comparison of Grof's theories with Whitehead's process philosophy has attempted to make some small contribution to the endeavor of theoretical corroboration.

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