

RICHARD NEVILLE *Voyage into mystic*

IN THE LARGE round communal building at a teachers' training college in Brisbane, 100 people lie flat on their backs. Their eyes are shut and they breathe slowly and deeply, trying to relax. About to take off on a "vision quest," they are nervous. This has to be a forage among the dark, untrammelled furrows of their own unconscious... and I am among them.

"You are walking along a path which winds up a hill," announced Dr Friedemann Wieland as the lilt of a Kitaro tape conjured up meadows and streams.

Our path gets higher and steeper and rougher. In my mind, it turns into a rocky trail ascending the Blue Mountains. But there's an obstacle, a door — huge, forbidding, mysterious — "which turns out to be unlocked," continues the voice, "and you find you can easily push it open."

I hesitate. "You are entering the land of your visions." Do I really want to unlock the unknown?

Our guide is dropping out, leaving us alone to face whatever lies beyond the door. Worse: sitting beside us is a "partner," ready to hear all that we encounter. By now, the roundhouse is carpeted with murmurs of pluckier travellers. Oh, no. What am I doing here?

On one level, the answer was easy: I had come to a rock festival of the unconscious mind — The Australian Transpersonal Conference, held in Brisbane this year. For four days, an overflowing auditorium was addressed by US superstars of self-awareness — Stanislav Grof, Ken Keyes and John Weir Perry. Their message was reinforced by a series of intimate and prolonged "intensives" con-

ducted by them and such other luminaries as Geshe Lhundrub Sopa, Tibetan lama; Leslie Conton, scholar of shamanism; Brian McCusker, nuclear physicist; Jan Clanton Collins, Jungian analyst... as well as prominent local New Ager, Burnam Burnam, Nevill Drury and Lionel Fifield. The topics ranged from the Science of Happiness to the Evolution of Science, from Communication with nature to Music and Magical Reality, from Learning to Love money to "Spiritual Crisis — Psychosis or Visionary State."

The participants surprised me. Hundreds of shrinks, of course, but I kept meeting civil servants, lawyers and doctors. ("Why are you here?" I asked a dermatologist who replied, "Because I'm looking for the real source of my patients' skin problems.")

Weary of being labelled "mild-mannered," a civil servant told me that he was searching for the anarchist within. There were lots of nurses, midwives, sociologists and a smattering of veterans from the counter-culture.

Such diversity coincides with the quickening community interest in self transformation and the New Age. Yes, it's one of those horrible catchcries that conjures a muesli of me-me mind games, fake religions and shoddy sales practices. For years, I have been tramping through this mush in a state of poised and exciteable ambivalence.

Self transformation seems possible, even necessary, and today's toolkit is shiny and expanding. Sure, I'm keen to tinker — but there's always the dark shadow of the real world.

While health-food bulletin boards are aglow with Aquarian announcements ("life after death — available on cas-



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sette") and grandmothers jostle at the WEA for courses in Relaxation, the mean streets of Belfast and Beirut are playgrounds for tomorrow's terrorists. Maybe we softies are responding to psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Food, shelter; sex and status are crudely secure, so now we yearn for self fulfilment. And yet, embedded at the core of this cosmic expectation, there is a genuine revelation about the world and our place in it.

It's as though the mystics have come down from the mountain. What used to be so secret and impenetrable is a cult best-seller. Esoteric ideas are infiltrating the highest levels of corporate management, way beyond the spectacle of executives doing group Tai Chi and into the very philosophy of the boardroom.



The sterner disciplines are under siege — science, medicine, even economics — while the gentler pursuits are radiantly agog with new-found relevance. The human potential movement has come of age. Transpersonal means beyond the personal. It means that we exist in a web of mutually conditioned relationships with each other and with the natural environment.

The movement is much wider than a faddish brand of therapy. The central focus of health is consciousness, say the New Agers, who claim to be making new maps of the human psyche.

So, how come you're still flat on your back in the roundhouse?

All right, all right, let's push past this wretched door . . .

Creak. Creak. I'll spare you purple

GOOD WEEKEND

prose about colonnades rimmed with stalactites on sandy shores but I'm sorry to say that I encountered an iron-masked rider on a white horse (thanks a lot, Bergman) who took me off at a flying gallop to lay waste a city in seconds. And it was fun watching the tower blocks tumble. Feeling guilty, I reached into my abyss (always handy) for a quote from Bakunin — "To destroy is to create" — and hoped that my stationary "partner" would not be too shocked by this carnage. What does it mean? Does it matter?

The journey didn't end there, fortunately, but I was reminded later of a phrase from my provocative past — that "satire is intellectual slum clearance." Derision was in our blood back then, not just at society but also at each other. The highest form of social intercourse was the

witty put-down. Dorothy Parker and Oscar Wilde held imaginary sway at our dinner parties, despite the misery of their private lives. The wise guys were wise-guys. Role models had big brains and sharp tongues, scouring libraries and papers for anti-social ammunition. But the spirit was mean. And as the years rolled on, their meanness has showed.

Artsy types adopted the bohemian pose of self-destruction, all too successfully, and the survivors still seek salvation in good restaurants and bad drugs.

There was our fling with existentialism, which cloaked nihilism in charming French longueurs and then a spurt of reddish rhetoric, to clear the decks. It fires my nostalgia to hear that Colonel Gaddafi's favourite book is *The Outsider*, by Colin Wilson — oh, how we all ▷

identified with those suffering, angry anti-heroes. Onwards Colonel, onwards, the terrain has changed.

This transpersonal dawn is bound to be greeted cynically by old lefties reared on a concept of class struggle, atheism and paranoia. You know the sort of thing: loving "the people" but hating that person.

Let's accept that the human potential bandwagon is laden with ratbags (there I go again, the endemic squib) . . . laden with individuals prone to gaze meaningfully at a mosaic of tea bags.

So what? A few nuts enhance the cake. Raising consciousness is hard work (in my case, like raising the *Titanic*) and it's natural to want the spiritual equivalent of instant coffee. Still, whenever I hear the word "guru," I reach for my revolver.

It probably followed on from rock 'n' roll. Aging groupies needed their priests to be superstars. Besides, some of the pink robed mystics knew a few tricks and nothing is more boring than orthodox Christianity. I'm not knocking the martyrs and saints — just the dreary, self-righteous sermons of my Presbyterian schooldays.

Terracotta figures found in the Punjab, dated 3,000 BC, show people doing yoga, so it's not exactly a fad. It was natural for disenchanted Westerners to go East, to where bliss is an industry and not something last seen on the road to Damascus. Hindu literature is full of techniques for getting high without drugs, and without gurus, but the Western fetish for superheroes and public relations puts these prophets in towers of psychobabble. That phase may be past. Enlightenment is not about men, but methods . . .

What a wank, you might say, the world is hurtling to catastrophe: from nuclear horrors, a wrecked eco-system, 20 million dead each year from malnutrition, 600 million chronically hungry . . . and you're on about middle-class angst.

Yes, I always wondered what Buddha would have done when the bulldozers moved in on his banyan tree. It is precisely because the world is in such a state of crisis that the conflict between politics and religion must be transcended. All these crises are man made, their causes are psychological. The cures must come from the same source; which means the planet needs psychological maturity . . . fast.

We are locked in a race between self destruction and self discovery. Politics must move from class struggle to global awareness and religion from prostrating at altars to altering states. Which is why I believe that to turn a deaf ear to the third eye is dumb.

Meanwhile, I'm still on the round-house floor. So, what happened after I razed the city?

The horseman departed — farewell,



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stale vision — leaving me alone to clamber through clichés of tunnels, bastions and hillsides. It was an ascent, at least, to a jagged rim of icy pinnacles and beyond . . . to a still, circular lake which suddenly kaleidoscoped into a vista of repeated pools . . . a plateau of mirrors . . . and then the voice, the gentle tones of Dr. Wieland bringing us all back to the conference.

But it was not over yet.

Now, we had to form groups of five. In turn, each of us was asked to wear a blindfold in front of the other four and dance the vision.

What's going on?

Friedemann Wieland believes that people need different visions for different stages of life. If a person in retirement, say, clings to an outmoded vision, they can become a vegetable. Loss of vision can cause disease. Each one of us, deep inside, already knows the next step.

Inspired by Carl Jung and the sacred traditions of ancient cultures, Wieland seeks to "uncover creative potential and to raise a personal crisis to the level of initiation." This session was only a taste — his Brisbane-based workshops are more comprehensive. "I am often stunned," he told me "by the wisdom inside people." He just offers a framework, a way for people to regain control of their lives.

So the music began. I watched and helped as each of the four women in my group did her number . . . delimiting their space, blocking falls, helping them fly, swinging their bodies . . . and all the time dreading my turn.

What would be my dance? From Satire to Sartre, a jive . . . from Psychodelia to Psychosis, a twist . . . or maybe a rumba . . . from revolution to revelation.

My journey felt so paltry. For days, we had been hearing bizarre case histories. In his opening address, *Beyond the Brain*,

Stanislav Grof had given a vivid account of four kinds of transpersonal states (for Awakenings, or Cosmic Consciousness), the fruits of his 30 years research. After prolific use of LSD from 1954, he ceased using the psychedelic drug on patients 10 years ago and found a way to delve into their unconscious without chemicals.

Using controlled breathing, evocative music and body work, Grof and his wife Christina found that they could induce and explore identical transpersonal states. Grof built up an extended, controversial model of the psyche to become one of the chief theoreticians of the transpersonal movement. He says this model is virtually the same as those developed over centuries by various mystical traditions. Huge, slow-talking and soberly dressed, his presence loomed large over the conference.

Yes, but is he mad?

Some would say so, as he talked of breaking our rigid identity (that "skin encapsulated ego") and of creating a feeling of oneness with all, letting the old identity "leak through the skin" and melt boundaries between people . . . yet others would recognise this as group consciousness. Grof moves on to stranger things.

Of those he has worked with in transpersonal states who identify utterly with trees, sea mammals, the elements, insects, even amoebas. Of those who tune into mythologies of which they were unaware, such as the Aztec heaven or Eskimo hell. Unnerving accounts of near death experiences, time travel, synchronicities, spirits and experiencing "the universal void . . ."

Phew! And that was just the opening address.

According to transpersonalists, because of the popularity of a whole range of spiritual practices, thousands of people in the West are reaching these exalted and demanding states of consciousness. ▽



Panel discussion at the Transpersonal Conference in Brisbane

MICHAEL NEY

They are in a panic — there is no cultural support, so they are reeling from apparent breakdowns.

The buzz term is "spiritual emergencies." Such people are not suffering a mental disease, according to this view, but are undergoing an evolutionary crisis.

These spiritual emergencies can take many forms, of which one of the most common is said to be the Awakening of Serpent Power, Kundalini. The paperbacks on yoga years ago warned readers not to mess around with Kundalini, the metaphorical serpent which lies asleep at the base of the spine. Too late. It seems that thousands are showing dramatic signs of the serpent's arousal: spasms, violent shaking, complex twisting; involuntary laughing, crying, chanting; talking in tongues, clenching jaws, diarrhea, nausea, loss of appetite, visions; dozens of other symptoms. But don't despair. It is all said to be part of a "positive restructuring of personality." The death rattles of an ego, prior to rebirth and transcendence.

All this might sound like esoteric gobbledgook or hippie trash but so pervasive have become these breakdowns/breakthroughs that a worldwide Spiritual Emergency Network maintains a listing of 1,500 transpersonal counselors, 24-hour care centres, psychiatrists and non-professional listeners for instant referral. The US phone number is (415) 327 2776. And you thought cosmic consciousness only came to saints.

It's happening to the people next-door and there are many theories why, usually connected with the constellation of Aquarius as represented by a figure with a jug "watering the tree of mankind." According to astrologers, the deadline for the Aquarian Conspiracy is the year 2010 when the ethic of getting finally gives way to the grace of giving.

Some say it was all triggered by astronauts on the Moon who looked at Earth

and achieved instantaneous "global consciousness." Edgar Mitchell, sixth man on the moon: "... our quest to experience the universe is the quest to experience ourselves." A meditation technique which author Doris Lessing once said she practised in her African backyard involves looking at yourself from outside yourself. Say, from the top of a clothesline ... then a tree ... then higher and higher each time seeing more of the space around your neighbourhood, suburb, district, country, hemisphere ... the whole world ... Global consciousness on the cheap.

If mental fitness is becoming a craze, like jogging, then its Adidas is meditation which is free — or should be. Meditation will soon start to play a bigger part in public life. In September, an unusual appeal was launched internationally: The Million Minutes of Peace. It asked for meditation, not money.

If all this sounds soppy, remember that in later years the mighty Genghis Khan's military ambition was subdued by a 95-year-old sage who taught him to meditate.

"Make yourself very small and go inside your own body," said Cherie Sutherland to a room full of conference delegates, "and fix up anything crook." A Sydney sociologist, she was co-conducting a group intensive. Cherie told how she had used this visualisation technique to heal severe neck pain. A man in the audience said he had given up smoking, "without an ounce of willpower." Each day for a month, he popped inside his lungs and gave them a good scrub. Then he hosed out all the tar and crap ... and had not smoked since. A doctor said he found this technique was of immense help to cancer patients. And so on ...

Burnam Burnam, the snow-bearded Aborigine was such a hit that he made staid academics publicly contemplate lives of nomadic poverty.

"Your people have told me that, if I

talked with Aborigines for 100 years, I still won't understand them," implored an intense, elderly volunteer worker.

"Try listening for one hour", he remarked.

Burnam formed huge "medicine wheels" on the grass and, by asking all kinds of people to talk publicly about feelings for their homeland, induced a catharsis. I saw East Europeans kiss the ground and weep, as if in tribute to the emotions which Burnam's people so heartily invest in trees and rocks.

Back at the roundhouse, it was time for my dance ... the dance to the vision. One of the women bound my eyes with a perfumed scarf.

And the music began.

Stomp, stomp, sway, sway. The warrior stuff was easy and natural but I wanted to swirl and twirl up to the lakes. Up past the silly acid trips on Kings Road giggling at worldly absurdities, past memories of the theosophist temple on the beach at Balmoral, beyond oblivion, beyond all the books; beyond the eureka of discovering Hatha yoga, meditation and the homebirth of my first child on a mountaintop without doctors or drugs. Higher and higher until my eyes lit up with a simple truth: that the self within is identical, in essence, to the spirit of the universe ... and that the only reason for ever getting up in the morning is to flash on this fact.

The music is over and the blindfold removed.

The four supportive women look at me oddly. And I feel great, great to be alive.

For how long? asks the sceptic. Any lasting effect ... or just a thrilling charade? What was the point? To me, it was the glimmerings of a technique I could usefully explore. A way to put images to a period of transition. The dancing deepens the images, celebrates them, gives them life ...

After all, I had recently walked out after five years of daytime television and was pondering my next move. Tailoring "awareness spots" for a mass audience had been exhilarating but I wanted to move on, on from ferrets down trousers and schlock-horror current affairs. A daydream ascent to a lake gave me courage to devise a show to aim at the highest, to celebrate the highest of human endeavours. Now the vision seemed more focused, the dance more daring and — who knows? — the quest more caring.

And now the conference is over. In the wake of the daring ideas of the past four days, where we gingerly traipsed into extra dimensions, the gathering was ceremonially dismissed with a reading from St. Paul's to the Corinthians: ... "so faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." After which everyone filed through the doors ... in search, I believe, of love's wilder shores. □