The book is based on interviews designed and conducted by Roger Walsh, Alise Agar-Wittine, Wink Franklin, Charles Grob and Gary Bravo with 14 early contributors to this field about how their findings impacted their personal and scientific understandings of self, consciousness, aging, death, and contemporary societal and ecological issues. The work was supported jointly by IONS and Fetzer Institute which also funded an invitational meeting where these researchers could dialogue about their work and what they have learned over the past 50 years. The interviewees include Albert Hofmann, Ram Dass, Houston Smith, Stanislav Grof, Laura Huxley, Betty Eisner, James Fadiman, Gary Fisher, Peter Furst, Michael Harner, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Alexander Shulgin, Ann Shulgin, and Myron Stolaroff.

This timely book eloquently and accurately captures the accumulated wisdom of this generation of researchers whose knowledge and know-how are at risk of extinction. The development and publication of this edited book is especially critical since these pioneers, despite the rigor and quality of their research, have been forbidden to pass their learning on to future generations in more traditional ways, such as supervising others on how to use psychedelics in psychotherapy and in research investigations for which these substances have demonstrated potential. While the authors didn’t use this analogy, one can imagine what would happen to surgery if physicians were not allowed to provide hands-on training to the next generation. While texts and videos might enable future generations to crudely reconstruct time-proven techniques, the new generation would have to navigate a steep learning curve. This book will be an invaluable tool to flatten the learning curve when the value of these substances is ultimately recognized and their use once again permitted.

The summary section “Psychotherapy and Transformation” is one example of the editors’ keen ability to extract clinical principles that were uniformly confirmed by the diverse interviewees. The evolution of therapeutic use of psychedelics, from psychotomimetics that simulate the experience of psychosis for training purposes to adjuncts in psychotherapy, is well-documented in the accounts of Betty Eisner, Stanislav Grof, Myron Stolaroff and others. The importance of trust in addition to technique is just one example of a critical insight that will spare future therapists from fumbling with finding the components of effective therapeutic process.

The chapters on research have great historical import. It is very illuminating to hear Sasha Shulgin describe his motivations and thinking process regarding how to configure and create substances that have affected millions of people. Other researchers shed light on research directions such as artistic creativity that, while short-lived, showed great potential. Listening to the early explorers discuss how they found their bearings with these then new substances is a lesson for all researchers of any topic.
The chapters by Peter Furst and Michael Harner provide a cross-cultural perspective on psychedelics. Their reflections, based on decades of ethnographic studies, help to establish the important place of psychedelics in Western societies. The chapters on religious implications reveal another dimension of these substances that, while difficult to research empirically, cannot be ignored. The stories of the early days of exploration are important to document because they deal with an era when these substances developed the cultural baggage that has accumulated and which now impedes the development of scientific and clinical applications. In addition, accounts such as by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Huston Smith, and Ram Dass are incredibly revealing forays into the plasticity and varieties of religious experience, very much in the Jamesian tradition.

Yet the authors and interviewees do not downplay the shadow side of psychedelics. There is a refreshing ability to recount past mistakes and pitfalls and to acknowledge risks, especially in unsupervised use by unprepared individuals. Despite its brevity, this book will serve as an invaluable encyclopedia of psychedelic usage for generations to come.

The Editors

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Reviewer

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