

BOOK REVIEW

SPARKS, TAV (2016). *The Power Within: Becoming, Being, and the Holotropic Paradigm*. London, UK: Muswell Hill Press. 346 pp. ISBN: 9781908995209. Paperback, \$25.95. *Reviewed by Jay Dufrechou.*

Well known to many in the transpersonal movement, Tav Sparks has been on the front lines of experiential psycho-spiritual work throughout the world for over thirty years. For much of that time, along with his wife Cary, Sparks has operated Grof Transpersonal Training, the Holotropic Breathwork™ facilitator-training program founded by Stanislav (Stan) and Christina Grof. In addition to “working the floor” of thousands of Holotropic Breathwork sessions on six continents, Sparks has taught—primarily in five-day “module” settings combining lecture, discussion, community building, and Holotropic Breathwork—the groundbreaking understandings developed by Stan Grof and, just as importantly, a particular practice of working as a facilitator during experiential sessions involving non-ordinary states of consciousness, now often described as “expanded states of awareness.”

In *The Power Within: Becoming, Being, and the Holotropic Paradigm*, Sparks articulates not just a way of working with expanded-state experiencers, but an approach to the journey of life. The book is situated within the comprehensive psychology described by Grof in his numerous books, articles, and visual/audio presentations, including *Psychology of the Future: Lessons from Modern Consciousness Research* (Grof, 2000). Sparks characterizes the essence of Grof’s work as “presenting the power of numinosity within a scientific, philosophical, and psychological framework—or, as we say, providing language, method and structure for the numinous experience” (p. 27).

From the perspective of a gifted teacher immersed in this framework for decades, *The Power Within* complements the lifelong work of Grof by providing the insights and experiences of Sparks and colleagues in working with people venturing into the terrains Grof has described so well. This includes practical perspective on the lived realities of the sensory, biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal realms people tend to experience in expanded states, as well as guidance in offering the “support, support, support” (a mantra Sparks repeats throughout the book) so important in creating the safe “set and setting” that Grof and others have recognized as necessary for productive work within expanded states.

In *The Power Within*, Sparks is passionately concerned with describing the healing available through expanded state work when properly framed and supported, whether in the context of Holotropic Breathwork, entheogens, or the myriad other practices increasingly common around the world. His central frame of reference involves the facilitation method he calls “doing not doing.” Originated by both Stan and Christina Grof, and continually modeled by Stan into the present, the method as described by Sparks is a lived and challenging personal psychospiritual practice as well as facilitation technique. Along with a number of colleagues to whom he expresses much gratitude, Sparks has developed language

and teaching stories for describing the principles and particulars of this practice, which he has passed along to hundreds of practitioners around the world—and now shares in book form.

Most broadly, *The Power Within* expresses hope for emergence of a “holotropic paradigm” that might frame a global transformation of human community and our relationship to all that is. Coined by Grof from the Greek words for “wholeness” (*holos*) and “moving towards” (*trepein*), “holotropic” (moving towards wholeness) suggests the ongoing process of following what emerges into the body-mind-spirit-emotions from the depths of the psyche, often through expanded states of awareness. The underlying premise involves recognition that deep transformation comes only through allowing the production and embodied experience of the complicated and interwoven wounds and darker instincts lying within us humans individually and collectively. There is also recognition that an “inner healing mechanism” tends to arise within us all as a link to universal healing forces and impetus for transformation in consciousness. While a broad paradigmatic shift may be difficult to imagine at present, the clarity Sparks provides with respect to facilitation work is a valuable place to start.

Interestingly, Sparks views a holotropic paradigm as sharing features with a transpersonal paradigm, but demanding surrender to certain principles arising from Grofian psychology, summarized by Sparks as follows:

1. Healing happens in expanded states of awareness, and within an expanded framework of the psyche, including the biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal dimensions.
2. The unalterable director of the process is the Inner Healer of each seeker—a power within. This power can be experienced as none other than consciousness itself.
3. The facilitator’s sole task is to be a non-directive support person and to keep the seeker mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually safe.
4. Healing happens homeopathically, by intensification of whatever is emerging from within the seeker’s psyche.
5. There are three essential components of the therapeutic process: preparation, session, and integration. (p. 289)

The focus of the holotropic paradigm described by Sparks involves supporting people in finding their own way to the transformational power of personal spiritual (or numinous) experience. The right of people to *find their own way* to the numinous is staunchly protected as the key to unlocking “the power within.” As Sparks notes, finding the healing power of the numinous often functions as a “conversion experience,” teaching us that we are participants in what he describes as an “ensouled” universe. As Sparks shares throughout *The Power Within* and in a prior book, *The Wide Open Door: The Twelve Steps, Spiritual Tradition, and the New Psychology* (1993), his approach to the healing journey draws upon and is influenced by his work in addictions treatment. This includes a deep understanding that lasting shifts involve continuous work, transformation in consciousness, and even a form of surrender.

Importantly, Sparks contends the paradigmatic shift in consciousness discussed so often in the transpersonal movement cannot be obtained solely through cognitive functioning or the permutations of traditional forms of education. Sparks writes:

You just cannot “get there” through mental gymnastics alone. . . . a true, in-depth psycho-spiritual understanding of this current transpersonal or emerging holotropic perspective cannot be gleaned from reading a book, or from merely studying this, or any form, of psychology or science. It can only be grasped by a *radical change of consciousness*—one that will bring about a whole new way of being, thinking, and feeling altogether.

Transformation is just not about belief. It is about *experience*. This is why this paradigm collision has been so vehement and so difficult. “One just cannot get there from here”—not without a revolutionary rearrangement of consciousness. . . . (pp. 30-31).

Even so, Sparks believes, based on experience, such shifts in consciousness are available, perhaps increasingly so in our times. He writes:

. . . it is heartening how many individuals, who later report that they have been “on the cusp” of this radical shift for some time, have been able to open experientially to numinosity—intellectually, philosophically, as well as intuitively. After these seekers have experienced their breakthroughs into the new paradigm, upon looking back, they often recognize the “splinter in the mind” that had been plaguing them. . . they see how they had been preparing themselves through their life experiences for the culmination they have recently achieved. (p. 31)

The holotropic paradigm described by Sparks is based on a radical trust in emerging process over mentally based learned expertise. As Sparks shares, even with Grof’s vast knowledge covering many disciplines, when working with people in expanded states, Grof has always followed what emerges from the individual rather than impose any system. Sparks recalls how some of those in facilitator training in the early years asked “a seemingly innocuous question for the Grofs, ‘When you move in to support a breather, what are you thinking, and what is it that you do?’” Sparks continues:

Those who know Stan experience how he is seldom, if ever, at a loss for words. A questioner should be prepared to settle in for, as we say in the cinematic universe, “the extended cut” . . . This was probably the only time that I have ever—ever—witnessed Stan purposely modeling a rather Zen, “no mind” approach to an answer.

He thought about what we asked, was silent for a moment or two, shrugged, and said. . . well actually not a whole lot. . . (p. 173)

For Sparks, what Stan and Christina “did *not* say spoke volumes” (p. 173). Eventually, “Stan actually said something like this: ‘Well, we don’t actually *do*

anything.’ He suggested that what we do is more akin to just ‘holding the space’—allowing the breather to show us what she needs” (p. 173).

As made clear throughout *The Power Within*, “not doing” is harder than it seems, particularly because there can be a number of things that should be done to maintain safety, as well as support and encourage the breather’s process, depending on what unfolds. These things, however, do not require “an encyclopedic, theoretical explanation or basis” (p. 173). In fact, Sparks suggests, “to engage in such an intellectual exercise reflects the antithesis of holotropic strategy” (p. 173). He writes:

Most of the time, we do not need to intervene with a breather at all, except to wish her *bon voyage*, and greet her on her return to ordinary consciousness. During the session, we pay attention to whatever is going on in the breather’s body, or in her emotional expression, or to what she is saying. The strategy is to be as mindful as possible of whatever is emerging—from whatever level. (p. 174)

If the experiencer asks for help, “we encourage her to intensify, or do more of whatever it is that is manifesting in the moment...We are not required to understand what is actually happening for the breather. She will either tell us, or her body will show us” (p. 174).

As Sparks recognizes, even though these principles “are simple to understand intellectually, to *operate* from this perspective is definitely not easy” (p. 173). This is where facilitation becomes a practice, wherein “the main obstacle is nearly always in the over-zealous mind of the practitioner” (p. 174). One walks that fine line between noticing what is actually emerging from the breather (or anyone working in an expanded state of awareness—or anyone in life really) and projecting into the situation under the guise of “following my intuition” or “my training” or “my expertise in the psychological theory that I follow.”

When working with expanded states of awareness, the particular (and heightened) hazard involves the ease with which we can shut down or “colonize” someone else’s emerging process. Once we project our own belief (even if we call it intuition) onto another’s experience, we risk minimizing their singular personal power and dampening development of their own pure individual line to the healing potential of the numinous. It is development of this individual relationship with the numinous that may ultimately be healing and transformative, rather than any particular interpretation or head-based understanding of a particular experience.

For this reason, again following the communication culture developed by the Grofs, Sparks describes the importance of non-interpretation by facilitators (and peer experiencers) during the integration component of working with expanded states. Interpretation is replaced by a “listening with the heart,” a variety of “support, support, support.” Again, this is easier than it sounds, for a desire to support and connect with those working in deep transformative states can easily lead to subtle imposition of the needs or agenda of the facilitator onto the experiencer.

Here is where Sparks finds divergence between a transpersonal versus holotropic perspective, particularly with respect to therapeutic work. While making clear he is not suggesting a variety of transpersonal approaches do not have efficacy, he emphasizes “how the transpersonal paradigm and the holotropic perspective are, *in one unambiguous, fundamental way, actually quite different*” (p. 123). He writes:

The authenticity of the individual’s inner healing resources is the central, unalterable tenet of the holotropic worldview. Absolute reliance on the Inner Healer is what clearly distinguishes the power of the holotropic paradigm from almost every other system, even including many other transpersonal modalities. . . .

Although a transpersonal strategy may claim to be based on some partial, or even complete, reliance on an inner healing mechanism, there is no compelling requirement within the transpersonal domain that this mechanism be the non-negotiable power. Even if something akin to the Inner Healer is acknowledged, this does not guarantee that this truth will actually play the authentic, central role, or any role whatsoever, in a therapeutic interaction between helper and client. (p. 125)

Reading *The Power Within*, one feels viscerally the vigorous protection Sparks provides to the Inner Healer. Through stories and emphasized cautions, Sparks tries to convey

. . . a vivid picture of the insidious delusion to which we frequently fall prey in believing we are actually following a client’s Inner Healer. We can believe we are actually doing this, when in fact we are still unconsciously directing the therapeutic interaction. This often results in merely re-enforcing what may be the client’s life-long sense of multi-level disempowerment. (p. 126)

The story “from the field” that most sticks with me comes from a Holotropic Breathwork workshop Sparks facilitated over thirty years ago. The event had been planned by a well-known Midwestern therapist who “had experienced one or two holotropic workshops herself, and had undergone powerful experiences” (p. 255). Having spent enough time with her to believe she understood holotropic principles, Sparks had agreed she would have a co-facilitation role in the workshop.

During one of the breathwork sessions, Sparks spent “a great deal of time with one young man—whose process was very deep and powerful” (p. 255). Through description of the young man’s process, we see the “doing not-doing” facilitation method come to life:

He was in terror some of the time, and cringing and weeping for much of the session. I lay near him, to make sure he felt safe, or in case he needed other support of some kind.

After he had wept for quite a while, he reached out his hand toward me. I gently extended my own hand, and he, sensing my presence, I suppose, softly made contact with me. At this point, he grabbed my arm and pulled me to him. For the

next hour, I held him while he wept and shuddered deeply. Toward the end of the session, the music had become the meditative, gentle pieces that characterized the third hour—to give the breathers something to ease their transition back into hylotropic consciousness when they felt ready. (p. 256)

Sparks continued to hold the young man, waiting for a clue as to what might come next. “At some point,” Sparks writes, “the young man opened his eyes, his face bright—almost filled with light—peaceful and smiling” (p. 256). When he sat up, Sparks sat with him as the young man began to share some of what happened in the session.

In essence, he reported that he had had a life of abandonment, and emotional, as well as physical, abuse. During this session, he had relived some of these painful episodes, and experienced, at first, a magnification of the shattering disempowerment he had undergone for most of his life.

But then he said that a glorious woman in light had come to him, and had carried him to a meadow on a mountaintop. There she held him in the most authentic embrace of safety he had ever known. He added that it was the most exquisite feeling of healing, connection, and love he had ever experienced in his life. (p. 256)

But, things changed in the sharing group. The young man had remained “absolutely radiant—smiling, bright, and full of wonder” after the session and while others described their experiences. When his turn came to share some of his experience, he “was so moved...he wept for joy and gratitude in recounting the whole adventure” (p. 257). “Then,” as Sparks writes, “the tragedy of a lifetime occurred” (p. 257).

The prominent leader, who was his therapist, spoke up to her “patient.” As near as I can remember, here is what she said: “Robert, I notice that you have been weeping for quite a while now, even though you are smiling. There seems to be a sort of ambivalence, a kind of confusion. Perhaps we should stop for a minute, so you can focus on what’s really going on—probably one of your usual disconnects or avoidance games. Let your mind wander back and see if you can get in touch with where these tears are truly coming from—where you have gone off-track.” (p. 257)

Sparks describes what happened next as breaking his heart. He “watched this newly free, bright young man, slide down the mountain of his freedom right back into his previous lifetime of pain” (p. 257).

His countenance morphed slowly, from light and brightness, to ever-increasing shades of red and darkness. By the time he spoke again, he was once more, exactly, in the horror he knew so well, doing that so-called good work in the therapist’s office, like a “good boy” should. (p. 257)

While his therapist nodded approvingly, the young man “talked himself right back into the state of consciousness where he started—once more drowning in the

miasma of his trauma” (p. 257). Sparks saw him as “totally disconnected again from the goodness and brightness of the new world he had briefly visited, and which had the potential to reset a healing blueprint for his upcoming life adventures” (p. 257).

After the sharing group, Sparks spent more time with the young man. He did not “try to lift him up emotionally—that would have been another external power directing him still” (p. 257). Rather, Sparks asked him if he would like to close his eyes and see if he could recall how he felt at the end of his breathwork session. “Gradually,” Sparks writes, “his light began to return, and his body relaxed into the softness that dissolves wrinkles and pain almost miraculously—something we see so often in sessions, that we may forget just how special it can be” (p. 258). Sparks then helped the young man devise a “going home plan” that might allow him to continue what seemed to be a healing trajectory. “All the while,” Sparks shares, “I was doing the necessary dance of honoring his therapist, yet encouraging him to really continue to trust himself” (p. 258).

I devote so much space to this one story to illustrate not only the importance of honoring the Inner Healer in the holotropic paradigm, but to provide a sense of the moment-to-moment workings of the “doing not doing” method, as well as the powerful shifts that can occur in expanded state work. Consistent with my own personal experience, Sparks describes this young man’s opening to the healing power of the numinous as “actually quite common” and yet “always a special blessing to behold” (p. 256).

The intervention of the particular therapist in this one story represents an extreme example of a disempowering interpretation; for one thing, it is surprising she did not consider the possibility her client’s tears were in gratitude for a sacred healing experience rather than expressing weakness. Yet this example in my view is not unique, but falls at the far end of a spectrum of interventions or therapeutic stances (often subtle and unconscious) that interfere with rather than support healing experiences.

So how do we avoid making such mistakes? As Spark teaches, through ceaseless work on ourselves and a lot of practice. Sparks covers in the book his particular approach to working on oneself, which he calls the Awareness Positioning System. This involves “a willingness for the seeker to turn deeply inward—what we call *going vertical*—letting go of the ever-magnetic pull, at least for the time being, of external relationships, phenomena, and circumstances—what we call the *horizontal*” (p. 262). Analogous to practices for self-witnessing and releasing attachment described in many psychological and spiritual systems, Sparks’s method is a clear and simple process that may become part of a holotropic healing journey:

[H]orizontal, or external phenomena are seen as *triggers* that bring on-line internal healing mechanisms from within journeyers. In order to truly heal, we must recognize that the transformative power of our healing adventure can only be garnered from *within* our own psyches, or as we say, on the *vertical*. The companion piece to this directive is that the outside environment—the

horizontal—ceases to be the *cause* of our problems, but, when viewed through a different lens by the breather, rather as an unsurpassed *opportunity to heal*. (p. 262)

As recognized in most mystical traditions, a practice such as the Awareness Positioning System helps protect us (and others) from the hazards of engaging “horizontally” on the winds of strong energies brought forward during expanded state work or through any path involving development of individual power. Another set of the powerful stories shared by Sparks involve his recollection of using the system to diffuse the tense situations that sometimes, albeit rarely, arise between experiencers during group time, generally when someone projects intense internal energies out horizontally onto another or the group (pp. 270-273). After explaining the Awareness Positioning System, Sparks invites those involved to “do a simple, light, mini-breathwork...except without the deep breathing” (p. 273). Sparks then suggests “a form of self-inquiry, using what has become almost a holotropic mantra: ‘Is this feeling familiar? Have you felt it before?’” (p. 273).

Almost always, as Sparks describes, a shift occurs “from the horizontal to the vertical” as the individual recalls, often with strong emotion, some unprocessed element of his own history. “Now,” Sparks writes, “comes the final piece” (p. 274). When circumstances for expanding the emotional experience are not present, or the time has come for closure rather than opening, the “strategy is to send it, as we say, ‘up the line’—into the *upper* arm of the vertical dimension” (p. 274). At the upper arm is whatever source of inspiration the individual may have. “If the breather has trouble with this, and cannot think of what this power may be...we ask him to *imagine* that he believes” and to consider releasing what has come forward upwards to a higher healing power (pp. 274-275).

Through these processes, based on years of experience, Sparks suggests a “becoming”—an emergence of “being”—tends to take place within the seeker. While there is no universal endpoint to this “becoming,” Sparks describes the “presence” that tends to develop from deep and continuous work on oneself. Sparks believes this presence is ultimately what is offered in facilitation, similar to the conclusion among some that presence of a more traditional therapist is ultimately what contributes most to healing in therapy (e.g., Geller & Greenberg, 2011). Drawing on a teaching from the 12-Step tradition, an important part of his personal and professional path, Sparks notes repeatedly, almost as a mantra, that “*The only thing we truly have to offer another person is the work we do on ourselves*” (p. 171) or, slightly reworded, the only thing we have to offer another is our own “experience, strength, and hope” (p. 62).

Interestingly, Sparks also describes presence as grounded in numinosity and that part of ourselves that others feel never lies. He writes:

Metaphorically, presence seems to be a constantly beaming output signal of the truth-telling power of our individual consciousness, or as some say, the soul. It is composed of all that we are aware or conscious of, and all that we are unaware or unconscious of, or not in touch with yet about ourselves. Presence always reveals an ever-morphing dance between the various faculties of our being—

those to which we have already alluded: our physical, emotional, and mental presentations of ourselves in the world.

Yet these three characteristics are but a portion of presence. There is a meta-characteristic which encompasses these forces. ...There is a womb, a matrix, in which these three modes of *humanness* are but instruments of operation in the planetary field. This womb is *numinosity* itself. (p. 230)

In the close of *The Power Within*, Sparks plants seeds for the growth of various forms of holotropic therapy other than Holotropic Breathwork. Essentially, he envisions variations on ways to provide a safe “set and setting” for experiencers to open to the healing potential grounded in numinosity, with attention in any setting to an appropriate balance of “preparation, session, and integration.” For example, he recalls effective holotropic experiences involving forms of movement or dance and contemplates the possibility of one-on-one therapeutic sessions in a therapeutic office inviting expanded states of awareness. The challenge in the latter setting will involve providing enough time for experiencers to move through their experience in the context of busy daily schedules.

Like Sparks, based on experience, I am a believer in the power within. From the perspective of someone with deep appreciation of the paradigm Sparks envisions, I can note some of the possible limits of the holotropic paradigm, some of which are acknowledged by Sparks. Given the paramount need to keep an experiencer safe, it is sometimes the case that particular people do not have the readiness for self-awareness, or the ability to withhold from horizontal projection, that allows the safe opening to what emerges from within. Much as the holotropic paradigm might envision that any condition might be worked through with enough support, including the presentations and experiences labeled as severe mental illness in the mainstream psychiatric system, I suspect that some conditions are not realistically solvable on the earthly plane with this method; they may be more safely and humanely handled with other forms of therapy and, sometimes, medication. If so, the holotropic paradigm might describe a system more limited in application than many of us would hope.

I am also reminded of something my late friend and mentor William Braud suggested to me years ago, in the midst of my enthusiasm for opening to what emerges “from the body.” Contrary to a maxim going around that “the body does not lie,” Braud ventured that “sometimes the body does not tell the truth,” by which he meant that our bodies may be acting out of our complexes or from fears or less-evolved instincts. Braud worried we might mistake those types of reactions for some more basic truth in which we then invest belief, narrative, or action. Expanding Braud’s comment to anything emerging “from process,” without a strong commitment to relentless self-examination and ongoing support from those more along the path toward wisdom than ourselves, it seems possible that misguided or errant application of the holotropic paradigm could unleash forces that may be more damaging than healing, which possibility has always been a criticism of transpersonal methods by some mainstream authorities. For this reason, a responsible cohort of holotropic practitioners committed to continuing education and openness to examination and feedback—as exists in many recognized

professions—seems essential to healthy functioning within the holotropic paradigm if it is to gain momentum.

Even having said this, it is possible—and I believe Sparks would argue—that given enough time, enough “support, support, support,” enough strength of the experiencer to move into (and intensify) what emerges in a holotropic process, and enough grace from numinosity, “moving toward wholeness” in the midst of supportive “doing not doing” might be an always-available constant in an abstract sense, something pure. The shift toward a holotropic paradigm inspiring *The Power Within* may simply involve recognizing this “constant”—which I may even analogize very loosely to the speed of light as a constant, given that light is often an experience or metaphor for numinosity that heals. If this is the case, then the holotropic paradigm might be considered a form of gold standard, something that is perhaps not always possible, but against which other therapeutic activities might be considered.

If I am honest, the greater problem with the potential of the model shared by Sparks as representative of a paradigm shift is the question of whether any great number of humans are interested in moving through that within us causing our own suffering and the suffering of others. Holotropic work has its share of ecstasy, but the darkness and suffering must be experienced as trauma is relived and symptoms magnified—and how many of us are willing to walk that path or even open to the possibility of its value? Particularly in these times, one must take seriously, in my view, the great magnetic draw to projection, acting out onto others, and even predatory behavior. And yet, in such sobering times, reading a book with the passion and hope shared by Sparks can be a little slice of salvation.

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The Author

Tav Sparks is an author and international workshop leader. His prior writings include books, articles, screenplays, and poetry. Among his publications are *The Wide Open Door: The Twelve Steps, Spiritual Tradition, and the New Psychology* (1993); *Through Thunder: An Epic Poem of Death and Rebirth* (2006); and *Movie Yoga: How Every Film Can Change Your Life* (2009). His article, “Transpersonal Treatment of Addictions: Radical Return to Roots,” published in *ReVision: A Journal of Consciousness and Transformation* in 1987 is considered a seminal work in establishing a transpersonal addictions recovery model. His collaborative treatise on the practice of Holotropic Breathwork, *Doing Not Doing: A Facilitator’s Guide to Holotropic Breathwork Focused Release Work* has been used in every Holotropic Breathwork training program since 1990.

The Reviewer

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