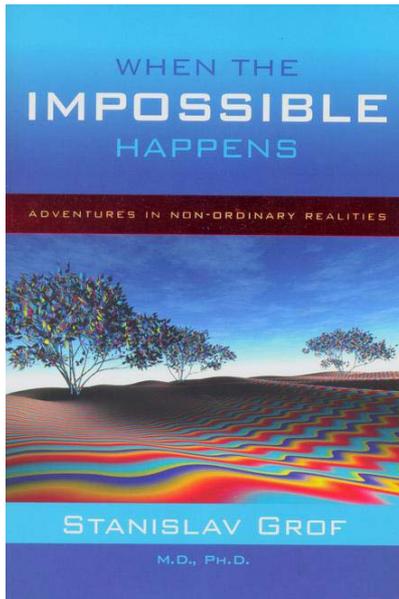


BOOK EXCERPT



Stanislav Grof

*When the Impossible Happens:
Adventures in Non-Ordinary Reality* ↗

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The Rainbow Bridge of the Gods

In the Realm of the Nordic Sagas

Profound and auspicious synchronicities can initiate and accompany a powerful spiritual awakening; however, they are not without pitfalls. They can convey a convincing sense that we not only are embedded in a larger ground of cosmic meaning and purpose but also in some sense a focus or center of it. However, the overwhelming feeling of numinousness that is often associated with these synchronicities can be deceptive and should not be naively trusted and acted upon. As we will see in the following story, even most glorious synchronicities do not guarantee a positive outcome of the situation of which they are part.

The events I will describe here happened about four years after my arrival in the United States, a time when I was looking for a life partner, unsolicited assistance of my well-meaning, concerned friends. At the end of 1971, I received a call from Leni and Bob Schwartz, who belonged to the closest circle of my friends. Their house in lower Manhattan, testimony to Leni's impeccable taste, was a favorite hangout of many cultural figures of the time, from Joseph Campbell to Betty Friedan. Leni and Bob were both on the phone at the same time and, with great excitement, they alternated in describing their recent discovery: "We've just met somebody really special. She lives in

Miami, and her name is Joan Halifax. She is an anthropologist, and she's beautiful and brilliant. She has done fieldwork with the Dogon in Sub-Saharan Africa, and she studies Santeria and other Caribbean religions. You'll have so much in common! You'll love her."

I wrote down Joan's name and telephone number and thanked Bob and Leni for their effort. But after one tumultuous relationship, I was not ready to throw myself headfirst into another relationship. Occasionally, I let my fantasy wander to Joan, trying to imagine what our meeting would look like and toying with the idea of calling her. Finally, after several months, I decided to give it a try. I was about to attend the Annual Conference of the American Psychiatric Association in Dallas, Texas, to present the results of our research of LSD psychotherapy with terminal cancer patients. The conference ended on Friday, and it would have been easy for me to make a side trip and spend the weekend in Miami on the way back to Baltimore.

I dialed Joan's number, and when she picked up the phone, I introduced myself and said: "I'm Stan Grof from Baltimore. Our joint friends, Bob and Leni Schwartz, keep telling me that the two of us should meet. Is that something you would be interested in? I could come to Miami next weekend. Any chance we could get together?"

"I'm sorry," was Joan's response. "I won't be here. I'll be in Dallas. Next week I am going to the APA meeting to give a paper on my work with Santeria."

"That's very interesting," I said, marveling at the coincidence. "I will be in Dallas, too, going to the same meeting. I wanted to stop in Miami on the way back. Which hotel are you staying in?"

Things were rapidly getting denser. "In the Baker Hotel," was Joan's answer.

Of all the hotels in Dallas, this was the one for which I had made my reservation. It turned out that I had actually booked the room that was directly below Joan's, one floor lower. Because we were staying in the same hotel, we decided that after our arrival we would connect with each other by telephone. When I arrived in the hotel, the meetings had already started. Joan was not in her room, and she had not left me a message. I decided to go to the meetings and find her. The program had many parallel tracks, eight if I remember correctly, and the meetings were held in several hotels. I looked at the program, trying to guess to which lecture Joan would go. I was using as a clue the fact that she was an anthropologist and also Leni and Bob's assurance that Joan and I had similar interests. After some deliberation, I chose a movie that was shown in a large auditorium of one of the conference hotels.

When I entered the hall, the lights were already out and they were showing the movie. I looked around and sat down in a nearby seat that was free. As I was watching the movie, my attention was repeatedly drawn to a woman who was sitting in the row in front of me, about three seats to my left. I actually started seeing something like a light aura around her head. After a while, she started turning her head in my direction, which was very unusual because she had to do it at a fairly large angle for our eyes to meet. This went on for quite a while and, by the time the movie ended, both of us felt so much certainty, that we simply went over to each other and confirmed our suspi-

cions by introducing ourselves. Another extraordinary coincidence was thus added to those that preceded our arrival in Dallas.

Our Chinese dinner, an assortment of northern Chinese dishes, probably of average quality, seemed very special. We talked nonstop about our various interests, discovering that Leni and Bob were right; we really had much in common. At the end of the dinner, the waiter brought us the obligatory fortune cookies, something that we usually would not have taken very seriously. But in the context of all the unusual synchronicities that had happened already, the messages seemed absolutely right on and they sounded like an ancient I Ching reading. My cookie said: "Your heart was hers from the moment you met," and hers revealed: "After long waiting, your dream is finally coming true!" Needless to say, we decided not to go back to our respective homes but to spend the weekend together in Dallas.

After this auspicious beginning, our relationship moved very fast. The weekend following our encounter in Dallas, I flew to Miami to spend several days with Joan. The following weekend, Joan came to see me in Baltimore, and we had a wonderful time together. The two visits further deepened our relationship. By the end of the weekend, we felt so close that we wanted to continue seeing each other as much as possible, and the idea of separation was quite painful. However, my forthcoming schedule presented a serious problem in this regard. I was to go for about ten days to Iceland to attend the First International Transpersonal Conference.

To my great surprise and delight, Joan made a sudden decision to take a leave of absence and join me on my trip. We met at Kennedy Airport in New York and boarded Loftleidir, the Icelandic airline, for a flight to Reykjavik. In those days, I conducted many workshops at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, and in various other parts of the United States. On many occasions, this involved taking the "red eye express," as I called the overnight flights back to Baltimore. A friend of mine gave me for these occasions a special kind of candy that he personally prepared. It seemed to be a perfect solution for the lack of comfort and sleep that these flights entailed. I was later able to obtain from him the recipe for this culinary panacea for jetlag and other forms of discomfort associated with long travel.

My friend's candy looked and tasted like a Middle Eastern dessert from *A Thousand and One Nights*. It was a mixture of cut-up nuts, dates, dried figs, and raisins rolled into little balls about the size of a large walnut. The most important ingredient in the mixture was "bhang ghee," melted butter containing an extract of sinsemilla, dried leaves, and blossoms of hemp native in Big Sur. Embarking on long night flights, I would swallow this before boarding the airplane. By the time it started taking effect, I had a greatly enhanced sense of taste and voracious appetite, which turned the airplane dinner into a gourmet feast. Following the dinner, I put on my eyeshades and listened to music until I fell asleep. I woke up relaxed and refreshed after a good night's sleep, usually just at the time when they were serving breakfast.

Joan and I each took two of these magic balls to ease our night flight to Reykjavik. When we landed, we were in a euphoric state of consciousness, one that was known among therapists as "the psychedelic afterglow," and we seemed to have remained in

this special state of mind for many of the following days of our stay in Iceland. We rented a Land Rover for the three days before the conference started and decided to explore the island. The Icelandic scenery is incredible — majestic snow-capped mountains, volcanic craters, sparkling glaciers, luscious meadows and pastures, pristine rivers, and giant waterfalls. Everything seemed ancient — beginning and end of the world coming together.

We found an idyllic place, a lodge in the mountains with several A-frame cottages scattered in a fairy-tale-like landscape, quite far apart from each other and from the lodge, each with a private little geyser and pool. We were several hours' drive north of Reykjavik, in a region that lies far beyond the polar circle. It was the end of May, and the magic of the white nights, enhanced by the "psychedelic afterglow," was an unforgettable experience. We now felt even closer than we had before, and we started toying with the idea of taking advantage of the beautiful Icelandic natural setting and getting married here before our return home.

The romantic time in our little eyrie came to an end, and we drove to Bifrost, the site of the First International Transpersonal Conference, to join the other seventy participants. The Bifrost conference center, located in a stunningly beautiful volcanic landscape, had a central lodge, residential units, and a large sauna, built of natural wood. The conference brought together a group of very special people, including Joseph Campbell with his wife, Jean Erdman, philosopher and religious scholar Huston Smith, professor of religion Walter Houston Clark, and the Icelandic mythologist Einar Pálsson. Among the participants were my brother, Paul, with his wife, Eva, and our joint friend Leni Schwartz, who had brought Joan and me together.

It is well-known that the population of the areas that lie beyond the polar circle has a strikingly large incidence of psychic phenomena. We could certainly confirm that during our stay in Iceland. We met many people who were precognitive, telepathic, and clairvoyant, and others who had reputations as healers, were successful dowsers, or saw elves and fairies. Various ESP phenomena were also rampant among the participants of our Bifrost group. This Icelandic experience helped me understand a book I had always loved, the *Gösta Berling Saga* by Selma Lagerlöf, the first woman awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. I had always been deeply moved by the intriguing way this author was able to merge everyday life and the mythic realm into an inextricable amalgam.

After our arrival in the Bifrost lodge, we sat down with Leni Schwartz to have a cup of tea. We decided to tell her that we were toying with the idea of getting married in Iceland. But we barely had a chance to tell her that we had some interesting news for her. "I know what you want to tell me; you would like to get married here," she said, and her face lit up. She was so convinced about the correctness of her guess that she got up and walked away without waiting for our confirmation. We found out later that she immediately broke the news to the rest of the group. Everybody got excited about the prospect of a nuptial ritual, and collective preparations for the ceremony started almost immediately.

Einar Pálsson, an Icelandic mythologist who for the previous twenty years had studied

Nordic mythology, came to the conference specifically to meet his hero, Joseph Campbell. The two became engaged in an ongoing series of profound discussions. Joseph, who had incredible encyclopedic knowledge of world mythology, was teaching Einar new things about the symbolic significance of some geographical locations in Iceland and the magic meaning of numbers involved. When the two of them heard about the planned wedding, they decided to provide a solid mythological foundation for our joining.

They reconstructed an ancient Viking wedding ritual that had not been performed in Iceland since the Christians had arrived. The joining of the bridegroom and the bride reflected *hierosgamos*, the sacred union of Father Sky and Mother Earth, and the symbol of this union was the rainbow. The conference organized by an Icelandic couple, Geir and Ingrid Vilhjamsson. Ingrid's father was the mayor of Reykjavik, and her mother had an old Icelandic costume. They brought it from Reykjavik as a wedding dress for Joan, and it fit as if it had been custom-made for her. The wedding outfit we had chosen for me was a beautiful hand-knitted Icelandic sweater.

In the free time between the sessions of the conference, all the participants were involved in making costumes and masks for the wedding ritual, and some of them worked on the menu for the banquet. Joe Campbell's wife, Jean, an accomplished dancer and Broadway choreographer, choreographed the wedding ceremony and began rehearsing it with the group. Although neither Joan nor I had explicitly told anybody — except each other — that we wanted to get married, the preparations were in full gear.

The wedding began in the afternoon with a purification ceremony in the sauna, performed separately according to the Icelandic tradition for the bride and the bridegroom. Then the women in the group combed Joan's hair and dressed her up, singing songs and preparing her for the experience of the wedding night. Led by Ingrid, they tried to detach from their modern minds and emulate the discussion that might have occurred on this occasion in the old times. I met with the male part of the group to celebrate the end of my bachelorhood. We drank mead, sang appropriate songs, and told many jokes. Trying to tune in to the Viking mentality, my friends offered me their support and encouragement for what was lying ahead of me.

Following our sauna experience, we all gathered in the dining hall for a festive dinner. The exquisite menu featured many gifts of the Earth and a selection of freshwater fish and assorted seafood. The colors, tastes, and textures of the food, good wine, and the eerie light of the white night conspired in creating a magical atmosphere. After dinner, as we were dancing, somebody looked out the window and noticed that it had started to drizzle and that a giant, unbelievably rich full double rainbow was gracing the sky. Everybody walked out into the rain and continued to dance on the wet lawn.

While the dancing inside was jubilant and Dionysian, the rhythm of the movements now became leisurely and flowing, as if slowed by the command of an invisible conductor. People were moving in a tai chi manner, some individually, others in pairs or small groups. Somebody intuitively changed the music inside the dining hall; it was now meditative and timeless, perfectly matching the rhythm of the dance. Illuminated by

the magic light of the white night and against the backdrop of the double rainbow, the scene looked otherworldly, surreal, like a Fellini movie.

To our astonishment, the double rainbow appeared and disappeared three times. In the mood we were in, it was difficult not to interpret this magnificent display as a very auspicious sign. This incredible celestial spectacle would have been enough, in and of itself, to impart to the wedding an air of numinosity. But it also involved some extraordinary synchronicities. We found out that the name of the place, Bifrost, meant in the old Icelandic language the "Rainbow Bridge of the Gods" and, in the ancient Viking wedding ritual we were performing, the rainbow was the symbol for the joining of Father Sky and Mother Earth. It was easy to infer that this event had some cosmic significance.

In addition, for me the rainbow had a profound personal significance and was connected with another interesting synchronicity. During my first year in the United States, I invited my parents to join me, and we spent two months traveling around the country, combining visits to prominent representatives of psychedelic and consciousness research with sightseeing and camping in national parks and other places of natural beauty. Eager to see everything there was to see, we covered more than 17,000 miles in eight weeks.

Needless to say, our ambitious itinerary included the spectacular American Southwest. One day, late in the afternoon of a very hot day, as we were crossing the New Mexico desert on our way to Santa Fe, it started to rain. It was a very welcome change after many hours of scorching heat. The sun was setting, gracing the sky behind us with a rich panoply of beautiful colors. All of a sudden, a magnificent full rainbow appeared in the sky in front of us. The highway was absolutely straight, like an arrow shot from our car toward the horizon, crossing it precisely at the rainbow's right radix. I instinctively stepped on the gas pedal, to come as close as possible before the rainbow would disappear.

The rainbow remained in the sky, and it grew bigger and brighter as we approached. It stayed in place until our car drove directly into its radix. At that moment, it was as if we had passed through a gateway into another reality. We were suddenly in a realm of indescribable beauty, with gossamer veils of rainbow colors dancing and swirling around us, exploding into myriad shining little diamonds. I stopped the car, and the three of us sat there astonished, admiring this incredible spectacle. For me this event triggered the most powerful ecstatic experience I have ever had in my life without the help of any mind-altering substances or devices. It lasted the rest of the evening, and even next morning I could feel its afterglow.

After a good night's sleep, we decided to visit the Museum of Navajo Art in Santa Fe. Its main hall was a large round structure resembling a kiva, ceremonial chamber of American Pueblo Indians. The most conspicuous piece of decoration in it was a large and very thin stylized female figure, whose body consisted of parallel longitudinal stripes. It stretched in a U shape all around the entire hall, with the exception of the entrance, which was flanked by her head on one side and a short skirt and legs on the other. The native guide explained to us that this was the Rainbow Maiden, a very popular Navajo

deity. She played a crucial role in Navajo mythology, which reflected the importance of rain in this arid region. The guide shared with us the Navajo belief that if the Rainbow Maiden liked some people, she would envelop, embrace, and kiss them. This would result in an experience of ecstatic rapture that these individuals remember their entire lives. He essentially described what had happened to me on our way to Santa Fe; this auspicious experience has remained vivid in my memory until this very day.

The set and setting for the Bifrost wedding ceremony could not have been more magnificent. We got married at three o'clock in the morning in an old volcanic crater at the time when the rising sun reappeared in the sky after disappearing for only an hour behind the horizon. Joseph Campbell was the surrogate father who brought Joan to the improvised altar, and the joiner and officiator was Huston Smith. Walter Houston Clark offered as benediction Sarah's pledge from the Old Testament: "I will go where you go and your people will be my people." After exchanging rings of a Viking design and sealing the union with a kiss, we ran through a gauntlet of our friends, who were holding branches with green foliage and looked like Macduff's army from *Macbeth*, carrying Birnam woods to Dunsinane castle.

We got only about an hour's sleep because the group had to leave early for a long hike to one of Iceland's spectacular glaciers. I woke up after an hour of dozing off, ready to embark on the trip. As soon as I opened my eyes, I sensed that something was terribly wrong. All the thrill and ecstatic feelings of the preceding day were gone; I felt sober and somber. The wave of excitement we had experienced the last few days suddenly felt illusory and deceptive. And what was worse, marrying Joan suddenly seemed like a serious error.

Our final destination was a primitive lodge on one of Iceland's largest glaciers that had a communal dormitory and one single room. The group unanimously decided that this precious commodity would serve as the bridal chamber, where Joan and I would spend the next night. I managed to keep my concern to myself, and things continued to look wonderful on the outside. The group was still feeling the emotional echoes of the Viking nuptial ritual, and the spellbinding Icelandic scenery was truly extraordinary. After a glorious day in the mountains and a night stay in the lodge, we returned to Bifrost for the closing ceremony of the conference.

The Icelandic meeting, the first of a series of international transpersonal conferences, was an unforgettable event for all of us who shared in it, and our wedding was without any doubt its highlight. However, once we returned to the United States, my dismal premonitions began to materialize. Various problems Joan and I encountered shortly after our return started to take a toll on our relationship.

On the way back from Iceland, we stopped in Miami, where Joan introduced me to her parents, John and Eunice. They had no idea that Joan had plans to be married until she broke the news about our Icelandic wedding in a telephone call. I clearly did not meet the standards of the nouveau riche world of their Miami island house. However, they reluctantly accepted me, probably because, knowing Joan's rebellious spirit, they expected worse. The first three sentences Joan's father, John, asked after she told him she was married were: "Is he black? Is he a Communist? Does he have a beard?" And he

felt somewhat reassured when the answers to all three of those questions were negative.

Joan left her job with the anthropological department of the University of Miami and moved to my apartment in Baltimore. She made several unsuccessful attempts to get a teaching or research position at the Johns Hopkins University and at the University of Maryland. The loss of her academic identity seemed to take a big toll on her emotional condition. I offered her to join me in our project of psychedelic therapy with terminal cancer patients. She enjoyed being a cotherapist in LSD and DPT (dipropyltryptamine) sessions, but had to do it gratis, because there was no salaried position available at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. A trip to Japan intended as a honeymoon further increased the tension between us.

Fortunately, I was offered an advance royalty from Viking Press to write two books on LSD. At a party in Leni and Bob Schwartz's house in New York City, we ran into an old friend of mine, Michael Murphy, the cofounder of the Esalen Institute. After a brief discussion, Michael invited us to move to Big Sur as Esalen's guests and offered me the position of Scholar-in-Residence. A vacation in Austria and Italy and the move to Esalen temporarily took some of the pressure from our relationship and brought a momentary relief. However, it did not last very long; the differences between us continued to grow, and our relationship rapidly deteriorated. For some time, we tried to stay together, mostly because we did not want to disappoint the group of our Bifrost friends, who had created and experienced our beautiful wedding ceremony, and particularly Joe Campbell. Joe criticized, in his lectures, modern marriage for lacking a solid mythological grounding and offered a glowing description of our wedding as a model of a mythologically informed marriage that would last forever. When our marriage finally fell apart, and it was clear that divorce was inevitable, dealing with Joe's disappointment was one of the most difficult parts of the process.

The Icelandic adventure was a fascinating experience of archetypal energies breaking into everyday life and creating astonishing synchronicities. However, it taught me an important lesson. I learned not to trust unconditionally the seductive power of such experiences and the enchantment and ego inflation that they engender. The ecstatic feelings associated with emergence of archetypal forces do not guarantee a positive outcome. It is essential to refrain from acting out while we are under their spell and not to make any important decisions until we have again both feet on the ground.