

CHAPTER TWO:DR. WILLIS HARMAN, PhDand THE INSTITUTE OF NOETIC SCIENCES

When you are in the dream state then you think what you are experiencing is real and there's a story line and a cause and effects to the event, and so on. It all seems very real, it all hangs together. Then you wake up, you look back and say, "I had the wrong idea about causation. It's not that one thing in the dream caused another, but I, the dreamer, caused everything." Here we are in this dream we call reality. Once in a while somebody wakes up and looks back and says "well, ... the real causation is the collective dreamer, who dreams the whole thing."

Then, part of the dream, right now anyway, is that certain things will happen with such regularity that we can call them scientific laws and so on, but once in a while some things will happen that don't fit with those laws. That's all part of reality. The enlightened individual looking back is in the same position as the individual dreamer looking back.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Harman is at the forefront of the emerging global consciousness which he calls a "global mind shift" and enjoys outstanding academic and professional recognition as well. He worked for twenty years as a Professor of Engineering and Economic Systems at Stanford University, and for another twenty years as a senior social scientist and a futurist at Stanford Research Institute. He is an Emeritus member of the Board of Regents of the University of California (where he served actively between 1980 and 1990), Dr. Harman is currently (since 1978) the President of the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). Founded in 1973 in Sausalito (Marin County, California) by Apollo 14 astronaut Edgar D. Mitchell, IONS is an impressive pioneering organization in the field of consciousness studies. IONS is devoted to expanding knowledge of the nature and

potentials of the mind and applying that knowledge to the advancement of health and well being of humankind and the planet. These are indeed the concerns and interests with which Dr. Harman at this current peak of his career, appears to be fully occupied.<sup>2</sup>

I first met Dr. Willis Harman in a conference on Contemporary Paradigms in Science and Society in Oakland, California in 1988, where he was one of the key speakers. Since then, I have encountered him in many other events associated with the emerging planetary consciousness. I have interviewed him many times, in person and by telephone, and I have been truly impressed by his unusual combination of breadth of perspective, warmth and kindness, and personal accessibility.

In this section (based upon direct, personal communication unless otherwise stated), I will identify the sequence of events in the life of this well-established member of the academic community that caused him to question, in spite of his own firm foundation of rational scientific knowledge, the nature of reality itself, inducing him into areas of inquiry ignored and even scorned by conventional academia, and impelling him, as well, to a commitment to social and global change. In consideration of the limitations of time and space, I will attempt to highlight key "stepping stones" in his profound transformative process.

Willis Harman was born in 1918 in Seattle, Washington, where he graduated, in 1939, in physics and electrical engineering. He worked for a few years as an engineer, including during active duty in the USA Navy, where he served on the battleship Maryland during WWII. In 1946, he settled in California with his wife of, then, five years, had his first child, and became attracted to the prospect of a teaching career. He then taught electronic engineering, systems analysis, and statistical communication theory at Stanford University and elsewhere, and published textbooks on all three subjects.

Until just before his 36th birthday, Dr. Harman followed a relatively familiar and predictable career path, his life and goals resting firmly upon a solid foundation of rational scientific view of what is real, and there was yet no hint in him of his eventual involvement with interests as unconventional as futurism and consciousness research. But then a series of events began to occur--events that deeply and irrevocably changed his assumptions about the world, assumptions he had never before found the slightest reason to question.

In late July 1954, Dr. Harman found himself in a seminar dealing with various moral, ethical, and spiritual issues. Rather than proceeding in the usual "standard" academic fashion, the seminar encouraged, even emphasized, through intense group experience, listening to, becoming aware of, and expressing feelings that had long been blocked. This experience is deeply imprinted in Dr. Harman's memory, even forty years after the fact, as his *first* breakthrough into previously unrecognized and untapped feelings. It was a "coming to himself" which was not entirely clear to him until years later. After forty years, Dr. Harman still vividly recalls and describes events following that seminar.

... I was sitting around with a group of twenty people. We had been together for two weeks in an encounter group like situation. This sort of group activity is commonplace now, but in 1954 there was no such a thing as an encounter group. We had been sharing fairly deeply and on the last day and I ended up sobbing on the floor! If anybody would have asked me why, I wouldn't have had an answer. I didn't know what I was sobbing about. Now, first of all, it was very embarrassing because "real men don't sob", at least they didn't in 1954... Also, I knew it didn't have anything to do with problems or sadness. It had to do with joy and a good feeling. That just didn't make any sense. Looking back, it makes a lot of sense, but at the moment... it was just...I knew *something had happened*, I knew it was *a turn in the road* and that was really all I knew then...

Looking back from our point in time--after seeing the widespread popularity, and excesses, of "encounter groups" and so-called psychotherapeutic groups of the "human potential movement" which encouraged and even induced this sort of behavior--it may be difficult to grasp the profound impact that such a simple, intense group experience culminating in an expression and overt display of emotions and vulnerability had on this engineering professor. But for Dr. Harman, it was, at the time, totally unexpected and uncomfortable. Yet it was of such intense and lasting impact that it became deeply transformative.

This event appears particularly significant when considered in relation to the restrictive and psychologically oppressive nature of our society during the fifties--particularly in terms of rigidly defined *gender* roles. Dr. Harman is not alone in experiencing the transformative impact of a simple "transgression" of the "appropriate" gender-typed behavior of the time.<sup>3</sup> Examples such as these point to the validity and value of the subjective experience that is at the root of not only the human potential movement but also the feminist movements and the subsequent men's movements, and many other "consciousness movements." These examples also seem to suggest that access to and expression of previously repressed or unconscious emotions tends to have a profound liberating and transformative effect, becoming "openings" or "stepping stones" of sorts that may be followed by decades of systematic self development and an increased sense of purpose, caring and social responsibility.

Part of the impact of that whole experience, in Dr. Harman's view, seems to be related to the shocking realization that the seminar leader, a dignified and well educated professor of law and business seemed to accept what, for educated people, was superstitious nonsense--the idea, for example that prayer could effect change or that people could communicate through ESP (extra sensory perception). Truly shaken, Dr. Harman spent many hours over subsequent months in the Stanford library, reading, day

after day, about topics he had only heard of until then--psychotherapy, mysticism, and even parapsychology. The wealth of quality research material he found truly surprised him, even shocked him, challenging his contemporary ideas regarding "scientific objectivity" and "neutrality" and the "knowledge" he had acquired in his science courses; but he continued to pursue his emerging change in his "picture of reality".

Two years later, in 1956, Willis Harman became acquainted with some people in the "Aldous Huxley group." This was an international network of intellectuals, artists, and scientists in the Big Sur area interested in the notion of transcendence and transformation. They were proponents of ideas that were practically heresies at the time--ideas such as paranormal healing, altered states of consciousness, visual retraining, acupuncture, and also such notions as the decentralization of government and economy.<sup>4</sup> Their ideas and their interests were based on their own experiences.

According to Truett Anderson (1983), the psychedelic movement that flashed through the country during the 1960s predates the human-potential movement by a good eight years; yet the origins of both are connected to Aldous Huxley and his group. In 1953, Huxley had his first psychedelic experience. He experienced not hallucinations but an enhanced perception and an amazing beauty--a sense of the significance of ordinary objects, and he wrote about this in his small but influential book, *The Doors of Perception*. This book is, to some, the most persuasive argument for the mystical-experience potential of psychedelics.<sup>5</sup>

Alan Watts, when describing his own psychedelic experience in *The Joyous Cosmology* (1962), said that under special circumstances and in the proper context (such as with psychotherapy or some spiritual discipline) psychedelic ingestion may bring a genuine and lasting, change in consciousness. Within the contemporary field of psychedelic research, this was not a totally new view. Certainly it was a view held by

many ancient shamanic cultures who used numerous herbs and plants for the expansion of consciousness in certain culturally-defined settings and contexts.

Huxley had healed himself of blindness through visual training and the systematic training of attention and will. This earned him scorn and mockery among the medical community but, nevertheless, caused him to discover resources of the human mind and universal principles of consciousness which were recognized in Eastern philosophies. In *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), he wrote about these insights. This powerful experience of mind/body connection eventually led Huxley to become a member of the Vedanta society<sup>6</sup> and, in 1961, Huxley conducted campus lectures on the human potential for enhanced perception, self-transcendence, and self-healing.

Among the people Dr. Harman met from the Huxley group, he was particularly impressed with Gerald Heard, Huxley's friend and mentor, who was also very influential in the conceptual stages of the human potential movement (and of the Esalen Institute as well). Heard led a one-week seminar in which Dr. Harman participated. When, on the last day of the seminar, Heard described his experience with the psychedelic substance mescaline it was, for Dr. Harman,

... like somebody was describing a place that I could dimly remember but couldn't quite remember. There would have been no stopping me. I had to go seek that experience.

Soon thereafter, Dr. Harman became acquainted with a group of Canadians who were related with the Aldous Huxley group, a secret network that was exploring creativity, intuition, and related topics through a variety of approaches, including psychedelics, and he was thus able to fulfill his yearning for that experience.

I managed to get a session myself at 7:30 the night of November 16, 1956. I will not forget that evening. But even so, at that point, I felt deeply grateful because now I see what all these

people have been talking about. Five years later I had another experience that went even deeper and then I thought to myself, well I didn't understand anything in 1956, but now I'm grateful, because now I understand what those people were talking about for all those centuries. The last time was around 1980, no '78, about my 60th year anyway. It really did stretch over more than a quarter of a century.

Willis Harman had no doubt that all these areas that related to "hidden" aspects of the mind must somehow fit together and must somehow serve the purpose of education and he started a graduate seminar for his engineering students on a then truly-pioneering topic, "The Human Potentiality".

A personal search such as Dr. Harman's may not seem unusual today but, as he comments his autobiographical notes (1984), it was like "trying to find a trail through a vast uncharted territory- one that almost all of my colleagues were convinced didn't even exist"<sup>7</sup>. Over the years, Dr. Harman kept having experiences that continued to shake his linear, analytical way of perceiving the world. One such event, one that also stands out in his memory after more than thirty years, involved observing a woman under hypnosis at an amateur exploration of the phenomenon in his neighbor's living room. Under hypnotic suggestion, this woman was stroking a kitten she was supposedly holding in her lap, talking to it and listening to it purr—apparently deriving so much pleasure from it that it seemed as if the situation had to be real for her—validated by all her sensory experience. This event had a strong impact on Dr. Harman:

I can still recall the tightness that gripped my viscera when I watched her. ... My feelings were not entirely caused by the strangeness of the experience. The main shock came with my recognition of the implication that I, too, could be fooled, that all my senses and reasoning powers and scientific sophistication might one day leave me as incapable of detecting illusion as that woman was incapable of discovering that there was no kitten in her lap.

Another aspect of the experience was even more puzzling. When I realized the depth and completeness of the woman's illusion, there came a fleeting moment during which part of me seemed to be frantically reassuring myself that I could never be fooled as that woman

obviously was. And then another part of my mind seemed to speak up and say, "You already are." The kitten, and the evidence it offered of the illusions our minds can create around us, were unsettling enough. But who was the "I" that was reassuring me? And who was the "I" that exposed my self deception? Both had seemed to come from someplace outside my conscious mind, that was somehow normally hidden from or inaccessible to our conscious awareness.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, many different researchers have given this faculty of human functioning many names--the "unconscious" being the most widely used. But, personally, owing to his own experience and interpretations, Dr. Harman has wished to call it "the hidden mind". He explored it extensively and wrote about it and its potential capacity for "creative breakthroughs," attempting to show how our belief systems are primarily socially constructed--not unlike, in his view, a sort of cultural hypnosis--creating, beginning from childhood, mental mechanisms that limit our experience of reality.

Of all the numerous events over the years that profoundly impacted upon this engineering professor's once neatly-arranged perspectives, one further experience I wish to consider here is one he calls an "out of body experience" that occurred during his intense period of discovery during the late 1950s. This is how he describes it:

I was quietly slouched on a sofa, spending a relaxed evening with a few friends. The incident started, I recall, with an ordinary lull in the conversation. Suddenly, without any warning whatsoever, I found myself looking down upon my own body from a height of fifteen feet or more. I could see my body clearly, reclining on the sofa, and what was in the next room- areas quite inaccessible to my physical sight from the couch, even if my eyes had been open. (It wasn't until later that it occurred to me I must have been looking "through" a quite solid roof and ceiling to get that kind of perspective.)

My first reaction, a quite reasonable response, was to be very startled. Experiences like that simply aren't supposed to happen! But right on the heels of that reaction was another reaction, a thought that came like a voice that was my own but also strangely different from my usual



"rational" self. "I have always know this," this "other self" said, "I have simply forgotten until now."<sup>9</sup>

Though even now, Dr. Harman can not explain to his total satisfaction how he knew and what he knew, he contends that what he felt at the time was that he *always* simply *knew* that he was *not his body*. Shortly after his experience of being out of his body, Dr. Harman felt his "center of consciousness snap back" into his body, and he opened his eyes on a world that "has never seemed quite as unquestionably solid since."

Bizarre as that sort of experience may seem to be, it is not an uncommon human experience. Yogis, shamans, and adepts and aspirants of many cultures have, throughout history, reported such experiential events; and many aspirants have undergone prolonged and systematic training to master the ability to see themselves from "outside"--from some external vantage point rather than their usual subjective one--and, through this training and experience, achieved a transformation and expanding of self-perception.<sup>10</sup>

More recently, we have obtained a multitude of case studies from the growing field of Thanatology in which people who have been "clinically dead" have reported similar experiences of watching over their bodies and observing their bodies in their physical surroundings as if from above.<sup>11</sup> Dr. Elizabeth Kubler Ross, the noted physician who, through her work of caring for the dying formulated a useful model of the stages of loss and grief, reported unexpectedly having had such an experience during one of her workshops with terminally ill patients. She, also, describes this as a powerful transformative moment where the linear demarcations between life and death, self and others, and spirit and matter lost their sense of "absoluteness."

When Dr. Harman had his "out of body" experience (now often called OBE's), however, there was little, if any, foundation or framework for interpreting or validating the experience--and this accounts, in part, for the intensity with which it

shook his notions of reality and self and impelled him to find like-minded others who could provide interpretation and legitimation. (See also Ann Armstrong, which follows.)

Through the years, Dr. Harman continued to have experiences that challenged his original conventional scientific worldview, suggesting not only a reality much richer and enigmatic, but also the mind's power to selectively choose what experiences to remember consciously and which ones to forget--or to bury in the unconscious--because of their incompatibility with the contemporary framework and paradigm. During these years, he discovered, to his surprise, that when given opportunity to direct his life on the basis of intentionally-constructed beliefs (by way of positive affirmations), he found himself intensely resistant; but he persisted until he was convinced that this worked.

Convinced of the power of unconscious beliefs in defining our realities, and of our (often unconscious) resistance to change them, he has written extensively, including in his book in 1984, regarding the fantastic human capacity for self-deception, both individually and collectively, to the effect that much of what we consider true, even scientifically, can be false collective belief "confirmed" only in that everyone in the culture shares them.

The way we form, from early childhood, our pictures of reality, resisting (often unconsciously) alternative possibilities, is, for Dr. Harman, a pivotal issue regarding the nature of societies. He is a strong advocate of self-awareness, for individuals and for society as well, for achieving recognition of these limiting mental mechanisms, and for opening up to new stimuli and information--including that which society, or even science, traditionally rejects or totally ignores. He sees this as essential to an accurate understanding of the workings of society and the universe and essential for motivating and mobilizing people to strive for the global changes that are so crucial at this historic crossroads.<sup>12</sup>

In October, 1962, Dr. Harman led the first seminar ever presented at the Esalen Institute, then still called Big Sur Hot Springs. Announced in the Institute's first brochure, it was titled "Human potentiality." It was an overview of the "current revolution in psychology", acclaiming intuition as an expanded dimension of the human mind and weaving it with ideas about political and social change<sup>13</sup>. Soon after that, he became involved in research on creative problem solving,<sup>14</sup> and he also became involved with the formation of the Association of Humanistic Psychology (AHP),<sup>15</sup> as a growing number of scientists in various fields--psychology, psychotherapy, anthropology, comparative religion, parapsychology--were beginning to look at the puzzle of conscious and unconscious mental processes and to acknowledge the omission, within the prevailing scientific worldview, of significant realms of human experience. Over the years, these people became increasingly aware of each other, networking and collaborating, establishing a basis for an emerging scientific community that would incorporate many of these experiences as an integral part of human evolution.

In the mid sixties Dr. Harman was invited to attend a conference on "Voluntary Control of Internal states of Consciousness" sponsored by the Research Department at The Menninger Foundation (see following chapter). There he presented a paper on "The New Copernican Revolution" which dealt with the emergence of the (much neglected, in his view) study of "inner", or subjective, human experience as significantly relative to anticipated future social/global events. The pressing social issues of the sixties had impressed him that considerations directly affecting human lives were far more important than many of our preoccupying technical or purely theoretical quests. As a result of personal growth realized through the personal events and experiences of previous years, he was able to see ways of using his professional skills in the pursuit of articulating and dealing with these issues. His seemingly diverse research interests effectively converged when, in 1966, he joined the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), as a senior social scientist. He then formed and led a team to assist the U.S. Office of

Education in efforts to apply the newly emerging discipline of future research to guiding national policy in education and educational research.<sup>16</sup>

The SRI team was attempting to understand the causes of the alienation that was increasingly apparent on college campuses at that time and to gain some inclination how this disaffection might develop over future decades. It was becoming more and more evident, Dr. Harman says, that millions, probably tens of millions, of people were seeking and having life-changing experiences that moved them to try to understand more about their own minds. After carefully listening to diverse people and groups (campus administrators, law enforcement personnel, student leaders and human potential people) Dr. Harman became convinced that the turmoil on the campuses in the 1960s was a powerful indicator of the fact that people's "picture of reality" was changing. The radicalization among youth during the sixties was seen by Dr. Harman and his team at SRI as a "radicalization of minds", a change in perception that lessened the hold on them of the accepted belief systems of the American society.<sup>17</sup>

This was demonstrated, on the one hand, by the confrontations of "New Left" people with authorities which were deliberately set up to reject what were perceived to be oppressive modern social institutions, and, on the other hand, by the sudden interest in yoga, meditation, Eastern philosophies, transpersonal psychology, psychedelics, etc, among "human potential" sectors. Growing numbers of people were increasingly discovering, and honoring, their own personal, deep sense of inner knowing and recognizing that consciousness and perception are factors in moral, social, and physical circumstances. This same "radicalization" was reflected, in Dr. Harman's view, in the host of social movements that came into being or took new form from older ones in the decade of the 1960s, such as in the areas of feminism, civil rights, environmentalism and peace.

Throughout the 1970s, it became increasingly clearer to Dr. Harman that what once had appeared to be two rather unrelated topics of interest--namely the nature of