

Feed Your Head

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If the doors of perception were cleansed, said the poet William Blake, we would see everything as it is, infinite. For we have closed ourselves up, till we see all things through the narrow chink of our cavern.

Blake has been regarded as part madman, part mystic, and may have been both. When drugs like LSD and psilocybin first came on the scene in the middle of the last century, some called them psychotomimetics or chemicals that could mimic a psychotic state, generating hallucinations reminiscent of schizophrenia, paranoia or delusions of grandeur. Seeking the nomenclature to describe substances where mere micrograms could alter personality, others called them entheogens or god-inducing medicines tapping into transcendent modes of knowing. Now they are usually called psychedelics, from the Greek for mind manifesting drugs.

I suspect that many of you have tried them. I know some of you have. One member of our congregation who shall remain nameless recounts her own trip with magic mushrooms, out on forty acres of “raw land in the southern Colorado mountains. That would have been in 1977. It was early summer, so the weather was good. And the surroundings beautiful.

“As the sun began to set, the sky and clouds took on this glorious color, and I felt a tremendous awe and sense that there truly was a God. I remember saying to the sky ‘I believe in you, I believe in you’ over and over. An overwhelming sense of peace and joy descended upon me, and I cried tears of faith and joy!

“As I came down off the influence of the mushrooms,” she recalls, “I felt refreshed and at peace, spirit, soul and body. Not anything like some of the other drugs I had taken before or after that particular instance.”

My correspondent goes on to say that she’d been living fast and dangerous, distraught over the death of a romantic partner, heavy into cocaine. About that same time, she had another ecstatic experience, finding herself at an Episcopal prayer meeting, the tradition in which she’d been raised, but unexpectedly speaking in tongues, singing hymns, and feeling as if she were literally floating on air.

In the space of an hour, her life seemed to take on new meaning and purpose. In a moment, as Paul says in Corinthians, in an eyeblink, in the blowing of a trumpet, we shall be changed. And this seems to me to be confirmed by experiment and experience. Life can pivot on a dime. It doesn’t necessarily take years of therapy or a lifetime in a cloister or hours sitting cross-legged on a cushion. Inner change doesn’t necessarily take decades. Years of conditioning can somehow be re-programmed overnight. Just by ingesting a fungus, or drinking the right kind of tea, one’s philosophy, one’s self-image and neural physiology can be re-booted like presto.

Of course that might not apply to Unitarians. In his 1964 classic *Religion, Values and*

Peak Experiences, psychologist Abraham Maslow postulated that religious liberals were mostly immune to rapture. We were too verbal, too cerebral, too rational for ecstasy, he said. That seemed to be the case for one of our members we'll call Sharon. She'd immersed herself in some of the Great Courses, audio and video lectures on Aristotle, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Kant and other deep thinkers offered through the Teaching Company. Heady stuff, but she felt herself increasingly distracted, disconnected from her feelings, anxious, easily upset and thrown off balance. That occasioned her one trip with DMT, a naturally occurring molecule derived from the Amazonian herb ayahuasca, taken under the guidance of a teacher she trusted. What happened next sounds like the opening scenes of Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, where an orchestra playing Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D dissolves into a rainbow whirl of iridescence and undulating wave forms. "All I could say was Oh My God ... I guess because I couldn't believe that what I was seeing could have any presence in the secular realm. For a few seconds, I felt as if I were printed on a deck of colorful Tarot cards, then as I was on the printed pages of a book like Alice in Wonderland." She had as well the disconcerting sensation of disembodiment, existing as an expression of pure consciousness, a rather unsettling feeling, so she was relieved at the end to find herself coming back into her physical, three dimensional identity, struck with the sheer joy of being alive and drawing breath. Her first words once she had touched down were to her guide, "All my complaints are so trivial."

My complaints are so trivial. All you need is love. Be a little kinder. Don't sweat the small stuff. These and similar insights from the psychedelic journey sound like platitudes or the sentimental drivel of Hallmark cards. The difference is, once you've been there, you believe them. However hackneyed, you know the sentiments are true.

When I asked folks in the congregation to share their magic carpet rides, one man wrote to say that while he'd never tried psychedelics, what he knew second-hand sounded a good deal like the theories of Deepak Chopra and the Course on Miracles which explain how we create our own realities. His email attached a link to a Youtube featuring Deepak which I watched for about twenty minutes, long enough to conclude that listening to him talk is nothing at all like taking psilocybin. I tried the drug about thirty years ago, when Dori and I were living in the Pacific Northwest. We were driving in the country one day when we saw a horse pasture filled with people crawling on their hands and knees, all peering intently at the ground. We asked one young man what he was doing. He said he'd lost his contacts, then finally confessed that he and all the others were searching for psilocybin mushrooms, and he was good enough to show us what they looked like. That night I cooked a handful into the spaghetti sauce.

Like many who have indulged, I found it to be one of the most memorable and remarkable experiences of my life. What I recall keenly is looking at Dori's face. We'd known each other and been married for years at that point. I'd gazed at her thousands of times. But that night it was like seeing her again for the first time, simultaneously familiar and completely unprecedented. That along with a euphoric sense that the world was far more glorious than I'd ever known. Unlike being tipsy or drunk, there was no loss of bodily coordination. I could walk, and believe my cognitive faculties were probably intact, so that I might have done mental arithmetic if I'd wanted, but who would want to? All I wanted was to be, to contemplate such an astounding creation, put my head around it and feel myself a part of everything.

There were no tangerine trees or marmalade skies for me, just my wife, the home we shared, the street where we lived--transfigured--so that far from creating my own reality, I felt as if I were seeing the actual world for the very first time. In his book *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley recounts his experience with mescaline in similar terms, being thunder struck by a simple arrangement of flowers, mesmerized by the folds in the cloth of his trousers. As Emerson observed, "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown!" But the stars being visible every night, we forget to look and lose that gift of vision.

Habituation dulls the sheer magic of being. Hence our culture demands to be shocked, simulated, titillated every moment; nothing less can get our attention. Yet it doesn't have to be that way. Magnetic scans suggest the electrical activity of the brain on psilocybin is more diffuse than normal. There's less separation between the lobes responsible for tasting and touching, hearing and dancing, more cross-talk in the neural net, and this is also the way babies and young children process information. Naked awareness, virginal perception, are terms used to describe this state, which is characteristic of many trips like mine.

In a simile I like, one of our members says that "after it rains in Los Angeles, the air becomes cleaner, more crisp, the colors begin to dance with aliveness, the mountains before the rain hidden in smog become visible, there is more space, more freedom, nature is vibrant, your heart fills with joy, you become awe struck, inspired and filled with insight."

"Inevitably, the smog returns, the clouds fill our filter and the psychedelics wear off ...

"The good news," our friend says, "is that that glimpse, however short lived allows for those seeds of being to sprout. Now we must cultivate. Weeding is a never ending process, a struggle. But like flowers that blossom, we get occasional peeks at possibilities that are pleasingly pleasant."

After a long eclipse when psychedelics like LSD and DMT were not only criminalized but culturally scandalous, those pleasant possibilities are again coming into view. For the last twenty years, research at Johns Hopkins and other respected universities has begun to reopen investigation into the medicinal properties of these drugs to treat depression, PTSD, addiction and alcoholism, with encouraging results. Outside academe, the public has begun to re-evaluate the role of psychedelics, not just as medicines or recreational drugs, but as pathways toward wellness and spiritual health.

As ancient cultures and indigenous people for centuries revered the peyote, as Meso-Americans sculpted mushroom stones to express their veneration for a divinity, non-experts have long known and kept alive the knowledge of better living through chemistry. This is folk wisdom, widespread, underground, maybe like the mycelium itself, and you don't need a Ph.D. to tap in. For example:

"I grew up in a very blue collar family," recalls one of my informants. "My father had a seventh grade education, served in the Pacific and was a union member and janitor all

his life. He was a kind man. My mother was a sharecropper's daughter, graduated from a southern high school, worked as a Rosie the Riveter during the war. She was forbidden to go to college by her older college educated brothers and spent her life working in the deep south chicken factories and as a truck stop waitress.

"My parents divorced when I was eight and my mother returned to her family in the south with me. I had a year's exposure to her childhood religion--Southern Baptist--before I refused to go. It was terrifying to me.

Grinding poverty and trying to stay alive.

My time was split between the two of them. I never saw a book other than the Bible, they never even told me to brush my teeth. Junior college might have been the moon and was never mentioned. I basically raised myself. They did the best they knew.

I started taking small doses of LSD when I was sixteen with a few of my peers. I was never very experimental and certainly never took it after nineteen.

It changed my life. Hard to describe those 'trips' but it opened a doorway that can never be shut, thankfully. Seems, looking back, that it was like seeing science made visible. Obviously we are all energy, stardust, obviously we are all one ... everyone and everything. Now that I am old I would say hard science has proved the point. I never had a bad 'trip' but always felt comforted in the universe. I have educated myself, traveled, met amazing people. I opened like a flower, something that continues to this day.

"My fate otherwise ... marry a guy who worked at Alcoa, wear rollers in my hair, small town, 2.2 children, a divorce, a job at Kmart."

Life can turn on a dime, or even a nickel.

We know from penicillin (another fungal derivative) that drugs save lives. Will we someday say the same of lysergic acid, derived from the fungus ergot, or of psilocybin mushrooms, that they can be life savers? Like most drugs, they should be studied and regulated to insure purity, to warn of counter indications, to keep them out of the hands of children. Had I eaten the wrong kind of brown mushroom thirty years ago it might have killed me. But it didn't. It helped me. So should these psychedelics be outlawed or condemned? From my own experience, I'm rather tempted to say, Thank God for showing us these drugs. And vice versa, thank these drugs for showing us a glimpse of God.