

Psychedelics and **Species Connectedness**

THE FACT



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THE FACT that this issue of the **MAPS Bulletin** is given over solely to ecology suggests that at the very least the consumption of psychedelic substances leads to an increased concern for Nature and ecological issues. On one level we can understand that this may be due to a basic appreciation of place and aesthetics that accompanies the increased sensory experience, or that since psychedelic plants come from Nature we are forced to enter its realms when we search them out. However, on a deeper level we can also appreciate that a communication with Nature may on occasion occur through the phenomenological properties of the psychedelic experience, some of which have been hailed by experiencers as life-transforming and spiritually renewing, even “mystical.”



Photo of David Luke by Jonathan Greet

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With the aid of mescaline Aldous Huxley came face to face with such a mystical experience, even though the Oxford Theologian R.C. Zaehner (1957) denigrated his experience of “nature mysticism” as somehow inferior to the “genuine” theistic mystical experience. Yet the irony remains that the very split from Nature that some Christian theologians claim occurred in the Garden of Eden may lie at the heart of many people’s current sense of separateness from their ecology. Whereas, under specific circumstances of substance, set, and setting, psychedelics are capable of augmenting such a reunion. Despite Zaehner’s derisions, Huxley (1954) reportedly witnessed this reunion through his experimental uses of mescaline: “I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of creation – the miracle, moment by moment of naked existence” (p. 4).

Is it this naked existence that reconnects the natural environment to the mental capacities of those psychedelically-inspired experiencers? This type of experience forges a way of thought that is filled with ethical, ecological implications, and which is reflected in the work of shamans, alchemists, and other practitioners who respected nature (Krippner, 1994/1995). The patriarch of psyche-

delia, Albert Hofmann, demonstrated this by reporting that a mystical nature experience he had had when he was young prefigured his discovery of LSD. He stated that “...my mystical experience of nature as a child...was absolutely like an LSD-experience.... I believe I was in some fashion born to that” (Hofmann, Broeckers, & Liggendorfer, 2009, p.2). Hofmann wrote about attaining “one-

ness with Nature,” and it is this feeling of unity that characterizes many of these experiences described as “mystical,” no matter how diverse they might be in other aspects.

Throughout his long life Hofmann increasingly drew upon the great hope that psychedelics were the key to this reconnection for others. When asked about the role that LSD had played in bringing people back to Nature, he commented,

It has given many people good ideas, and those who have gone back to Nature have been saved. Many people, however, are still stuck in technological Hell and cannot get out. Nevertheless, many have discovered something which hardly exists in our society any longer: the sense of the sacred. (Hofmann et al., 2009, p.6)

Always vocal on ecological issues, Hofmann recalled that among his most satisfying experiences were hearing young people say things like, “I grew up in the city, but once I first took LSD, I returned to the forest” (Hofmann et al., 2009, p.4).

Providing us with an insight into the cause of this yearning for a return to Nature, based on their extensive experiential research with psychedelics, Masters and Houston (1966) noted that,

...the [psychedelic] subject, almost from the start, already has achieved a kind of empathy with his [or her] surroundings as a whole...That is to say, nature seems to the subject a whole of which he [or she] is an integral part, and from this characteristic feeling of being a part of the organic ‘body of nature’ the subject readily goes on to identify with nature in its physical particulars and processes.

But if a person is empathizing with Nature in this state, whose feeling’s is she or he feeling? The notion that there is some entity with which to empathize implies that the thing itself has emotions, and the idea emerges that Nature itself and the beings who inhabit it – be they animal, vegetable or perhaps even mineral – are also sentient.

Such animism is at the root of all shamanic belief systems, and, as Jeremy Narby (2006) noted, shamanism involves

“attempting to dialogue with nature” (p.16). In shamanism, of course, this communication is frequently achieved through the ingestion of psychedelic plants, fungi, or other natural substances (e.g., Krippner, 1994).

As a nature-based epistemology, shamanism is ecological to its core. The shaman is a caretaker of Nature and a negotiator between people and “other-than-human persons,” as Graham Harvey (2005) called them in his “Animist Manifesto.” For Harvey, it is humanity’s fungal friends themselves that transmit the idea of animism the best: “Maybe sometimes the mushrooms just want to help us join in the big conversation that’s going on all around us.” (Harvey, 2005, p.128)

Mycologist Paul Stamets speculated that mushrooms have a hidden agenda to bring humans into communication with other species. In studying the taxonomy of the *Psilocybe* genus Stamets noted how these psychoactive mushrooms proliferate particularly in the wake of human’s habits of “taming the land” and other interactions with the natural world. Examples include, “chopping down trees, breaking ground to create roads and trails, and domesticating livestock” (Harrison, Straight, Pendell, & Stamets, 2007, p. 138). By this means, Stamets believed, certain mushrooms become available to those who most need to speak to Nature through them. For Stamets, when this dialogue is engaged, the message “...is always that we are part of an ‘ecology of consciousness,’ that the Earth is in peril, that time is short, and that we’re part of a huge, universal bio-system.” However, Stamets is not alone because “many people who have taken these substances report receiving the same message” (Harrison et al., 2007, p. 138).

There is a body of research that backs up Stamets’ assertion that it is not just he and Harvey who are receiving mycelial messages from Nature. A survey into people’s exceptional experiences with psychedelics found that encountering the “spirit” of the ingested plant or fungus was the most widely reported of a range of 17 “paranormal” and “transpersonal” type experiences occurring with those taking psilocybin-containing mushrooms (Luke & Kittenis, 2005). According to the

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respondents this encounter also occurred quite frequently, and was the second most prevalent experience with any one substance, preceded only by experiences of “unity consciousness” on LSD. Additionally, the encounter with “plant consciousness” was the most widely reported transpersonal event for several other psychedelic substances too, such as ayahuasca, *Salvia divinorum*, and the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom. If Harvey’s “Animist Manifesto” is to be taken seriously then these plants are clearly trying to tell humanity something.

Interpreting humanity’s many dialogues on the mushroom experience, mycophile Andy Letcher (2007) termed these mushroom-mediated encounters with discarnate spirit entities the “animaphany.” He warned, however, that these experiences largely go ignored because, in a Foucauldian sense, they offer a resistive discourse to that of the societally legitimated explanations of what occurs under the influence of such plants and fungi, in the West at least (Foucault, 2006). Being based solely on the effects of mushrooms on others, these legitimated discourses typically take a pathological, psychological or prohibitory stance, and so this subjective animaphany appears to transgress a fundamental societal boundary, communicating with “spirits,” which subsequently becomes labelled as “madness.” But which is the more “mad,” communicating with the spirits of Nature or sitting back while Earth’s ecology descends rapidly into the greatest wave of mass extinction in 65 million years?



Albert Hofmann and Stanley Krippner.
Photo courtesy of Stanley Krippner

It appears that the plant entities are not the only ones getting in on the apparent conservation conversation; as such pharmacologically-induced trans-species communications also engage the animal kingdom. Through the use of psychedelics, particularly LSD and ketamine, the physician John C. Lilly, M.D. (1978) claimed to have begun communicating telepathically with other species and consequently made an ethical U-turn in his highly invasive animal research (such as dolphin dissection), to increasingly involving consensual peer to peer exchanges with nonhuman species. If other species can communicate with humans, then perhaps the best way to do this would be directly – in a language that transcends physical restrictions. If such telepathic-like communication requires changing one’s consciousness, then certain plants are expertly disposed to begin this dialogue through their potent psychoactive compounds.

Ever since Albert Hofmann (2005) had an out-of-body experience on his first accidental LSD journey, and Gordon Wasson’s photographer Allan Richardson had an apparently predictive vision during their seminal mushroom trip in Mexico (Richardson, 1990), such psychedelic explorers as Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond have been intrigued by the occasional stimulation of anomalous faculties with the use of these psychoactive substances. A review of the parapsychological literature (Krippner & Davidson, 1970; Luke, in press) indicates that while the issue still requires further research there is good reason to consider the possibility that psychedelics might actually promote such parapsychological phenomena as telepathy. However, the kind of species centrism that *Homo sapiens* are prone to, tends to promulgate the view that animals, and especially plants, lack consciousness. However, given the possibility that these plants and animals might be sentient, direct communication with them should not be ruled out, and might be encouraged instead. Psychedelics, especially those involving plants, would seem well suited for that task.

The question still remains why certain plants produce highly psychedelic alkaloids that often have profound effects on humans. Is it just an accident that these plants produce exotic compounds that have no apparent benefit to the plant and yet interact so sophisticatedly with human minds, especially given that Nature (apart from humans, perhaps) is not disposed to wasting resources without good reason? On the contrary, some evidence has emerged that the human brain actually developed in co-evolution with psychedelic plants (Winkelman, 2008), although one may well ask for what purpose?

Psychedelic shamanism might be thought of primarily as a communication with Nature, for instance by asking the plants directly which ones can heal a particular illness, or by asking the plant spirit to teach them, or by using the plant in aiding the psychological metamorphosis into a plant or animal “allies” (Dobkin de Rios, 1996). Given that shamans have most likely been communicating with Nature in this way for thousands of years (Devereux, 2008), it might well be asked what can be gained for humanity’s relationship with the ecosystem from such a dialogue and, more importantly, how can Nature benefit from this relationship?

the environmental need of the time” (p. 97). As a sense of “ethical and psychological continuity with the nonhuman world deepens, we have the chance to recapture...some trace of the ancestral sensibility” (p. 96). This might be a clue that answers the question concerning human-ecosystem dialogue. Psychedelic substances may have provided a hidden resource to keep *Homo sapiens* from becoming so estranged from Nature that the human species would contaminate, pollute, and ultimately destroy life on Earth. The growing interest in psychedelic plants, their effects, and their use coincides with a need for what Ralph Metzner, Ph.D. (1999) referred to as “healing the planet” (p. 165). If so, the task of mending this tattered Earth can truly begin, and psychedelic sensibility can play an important role in helping humans devote their efforts to attaining ecological sustainability before the time runs out and Nature’s clock winds down. •

References for this essay are available on the MAPS Web site: www.maps.org

The authors express appreciation for Saybrook Graduate School’s Chair for the Study of Consciousness for its support in the preparation of this essay.

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This question is of central importance to ecological psychologists who attempt to understand behavioral and experiential processes as they occur within the environmental constraints of animal-environmental systems (Adams, 2002). There are several branches of this field, but all of them criticize what they see as contemporary human separateness from the natural environment (Krippner, 2002, p. 973). Rozak (1992) postulated an “ecological unconscious” that “rises up to meet