

Entheogens¹ and Psychotherapy

Andrew Feldmar²

Walker, there is no pathway.
You make the pathway while you walk.³

Reality is a sound, you have to tune into it not just keep yelling.⁴ Jerzy Kosinski,⁵ in an interview, said that for him there was only one game in town: "How close can I get to another person, without anybody getting hurt?" Not a bad formulation of the goal of psychotherapy.⁶ As early as 1965, R. D. Laing⁷ wrote, "Psychotherapy must remain an obstinate attempt of two people to arrive at a recovery of the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them." The patient is a *person-to-be-accepted*, and not an *object-to-be-changed*. As a therapist, my main task is to attend, to pay attention, to signal that I am harm-less, and to provide a safe container for the patient. If all goes well, a play-space opens up between the patient and me, and in it we can each practise being *nobody-but-oneself*. The introduction of entheogens into this play-space enhances the possibility of authentic meeting beyond the interference generated by egoic forces. Did He not say, "For where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them?" (*Matthew 18:20*).⁸ What does "in my name" mean? "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (*John 14:6*). At best, the sacred space of therapy allows love and compassion to manifest, so that communion or co-presence can occur. Suddenly there is the experience of an "us right now," that you and I are parts of, without either of us having to be altered to suit the other's book. Laing called this the *healing factor*.

I have been interested in *psychedelics* since 1967, when I left mathematics, physics, chemistry and computers and began working on my MA in psychology. My supervisor, Zenon Pylyshyn, was from Saskatchewan and had participated, along with Abram Hoffer and Duncan Blewett, in the first experiments with LSD-25. Zenon told me he had had enough strange experiences, that he had gone about as far with LSD as he wished to go. He still had what was once legal: Sandoz-manufactured LSD. I thought he wanted to pass it to me, for me to run with it, like they do with the baton in relay races. He offered to sit with me and said that the trip would take eight to ten hours. Looking back 33 years, I don't quite recall *why* I decided to accept his tentative offer. I was 27 years old, thought of myself as a rational scientist, and had no experience with delirium, hallucination, or altered mind states. I was curious. Very curious. I thought that, like Faust, I might make a pact with the devil in return for esoteric knowledge.

The first time is unlike any other time. Zenon⁹ gave me 900 micrograms and the surprise of my life. He made himself comfortable, read a book, occasionally glanced

at me, but otherwise he left me to my own devices and no words were exchanged. At one point he gave me a single stem of hyacinth to hold in my hands. I felt he had entrusted me with a fragile treasure, and I wasn't sure I could do well by it. The strangest experience that day was what I would now call *mind-interlock*: although Zenon had taken no mind-altering drug, I read his mind, I *became* he, I knew everything he knew. I knew how he felt about his wife, I knew how he held his penis when he stood at a urinal, I knew what he thought about what he was reading. I experienced intense and embarrassing intimacy. Zenon seemed unaware that I was tapping into his soul. After some days, during which my embarrassment persisted, I asked Zenon about some of my more innocuous insights. He confirmed them all to be true, and felt short-changed because he had made no inroads into my mind. He had become transparent while I had remained opaque. I felt shy and uncomfortable to be so entwined with my thesis supervisor: I was *loving* him through knowing him. I had no critical thoughts, and felt deeper and deeper levels of acceptance. Many years later R. D. Laing told me you can only love that which you know and you can only know that which you love.

Zenon didn't want to influence my expectations by saying very much, so the *set* and *setting*¹⁰ for my first trip were deliberately left vague and open. The intensity and novelty of my experiences were all the more surprising. I entered a bizarre, yet meaningful and encouraging, world of phenomena. I experienced myself to be a magical, complex, mythical creature. The experience was spiritual because I realized I was a part of something greater than what I could imagine. I was intrigued: I had experienced something, but I did not know what my experience meant. Had I gained insight into the universe, or just into what a mind, poisoned by LSD, might secrete: dreams, visions, hallucinations?

Following this initiation, I traveled to many regions many times with the help of many different substances. I took peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, cannabis, MDMA, DMT, ketamine, nitrous oxide, 5-MeO-DMT, but I kept coming back to LSD. Acid seemed my most spacious, most helpful ally. While on it, I explored my past, regressed to the womb, to my conception.¹¹ I remembered, grieved and mourned many painful events. I saw how my parents would have liked to love me, and how they didn't because they didn't know how. I learned, on acid, to endure troubling and frightening states of mind. This enabled me, as meditation has done, to identify with being the witness of the workings of my mind, observing whatever was going on, while knowing that I was simply captivated by the forms produced by my own psyche.

On one trip I was trapped in an isolated, encapsulated state of mind, and I struggled to make contact with the world. I couldn't hear, see, touch, smell or taste, but I thought and felt. I felt caged in an autistic mind. It occurred to me that many years might have passed since I was last in contact with reality. I might have walked in front of a car,

got hit, and the shattered glass of the windshield could have blinded me. Were I to regain my sanity, I might wake up in the back ward of a mental hospital. There might have been news reports about a psychologist who lost his mind as a result of ingesting LSD. Then I got the idea that a fire was starting near me and unless I could put it out, I would die in the ensuing conflagration. I tried to annul all traces of fire from my consciousness, thinking and hoping my mental maneuver could be guided, by unknown pathways, into the real world, and thereby save me from immolation. I found out later that my wife had lit a candle and I had, to her surprise, repeatedly blown it out with such fury that, after a few attempts, she gave up trying to re-light it.

During my apprenticeship with R. D. Laing in 1974 - 75, he trained me in his approach to LSD-therapy. In contrast to Stan Grof's method of directing attention *in* (by suggesting that the patient stay in a sleeping bag with eyes blindfolded, earphones on, and as little interpersonal contact as possible), Ronnie¹² liked, in his LSD sessions, to explore the *between* by *participating* in the session. Laing's only direction was that I fast for three days before the trip. He arrived to our London apartment by taxi an hour after I took the clear, colorless liquid contents of three ampules of Sandoz LSD-25, each marked 100 micrograms. He sat down on the floor near me, informed me that he had also taken some LSD to keep me company, and for the next four hours he *attended* to me.

Ronnie looked beautiful. He was wearing cool, velvet textures. His head conjured up images of Socrates. The light from the window felt soft and gentle, it was an early summer afternoon in London. When I mentioned the lighting, Laing nodded and said, "Let us be grateful for it!" I can still hear his Scots accent. I played a raga by Ravi Shankar (*Ahir Lalit* : for the morning hours, creating a mood of pathos, languor and pining), and engaged Ronnie in a dance of sorts. Our right hands locked, then our thumbs pirouetted, then our fingers danced; we locked both hands, in parallel, then crossed formation, we rolled about, disengaged, continued . . .

I looked into Ronnie's eyes and saw myself reflected there. I felt unworthy and flooded with shame; then I felt accepted. I asked, "Why would I want to hurt you?" I had thought up to then that violence was ubiquitous and I could not take love, caring and gentleness for granted. "*DO* you want to hurt me?" Laing asked. "If you do, I can think of one reason why you might: *REVENGE* !" I remembered my mother, who, in 1943, had been taken to Auschwitz. Ronnie said, "The forces of evil are infinite." His thighs trembled.

I heard myself ask: "Is there a way?" A long silence followed. His forehead contracted into wrinkles, he bent his head down. I had a clear vision of two opposing forces battling, creating a storm in Laing's body and in his whole being. A force of light and clarity was streaming into his head from above. Another force, dark, foul and murky,

was entering him from below. At last, he said, "I *believe* there is. We are doing it right now. It's unfolding through us."

An hour that seemed an infinity passed, and I asked, "Are you kind?" "Yes," he replied, "at times I am kind, and I suppose, at times, I am cruel." "I am afraid that I am not really kind," I said. Ronnie spoke softly, "You have a very nice set-up here: two children, a woman who is an artist, your living arrangement. You must have let *some* kindness go around to get it all together . . . You have more perhaps than you allow yourself to think".

Still quizzical, I asked, "Do you trust me?" Without hesitation he responded, "I trust you to cut the rope, and bet I'd come out better than if I had to cut it. I trust you as far as I'd trust myself – that much or that little." (Here, Laing was referring to mountain climbing etiquette, according to which the lead climber, when his life is in jeopardy, must cut the rope that holds the second climber: there is no sense in both climbers plummeting to their deaths.)

I: "Why don't I try to pluck your eyes out? Why don't I kill you or me?"

Ronnie: "I trust you more than I trust those to whom no such ideas have ever occurred."

The window was open and rainy, moist, cool air streamed in. Birds sang. I sipped tea from a tea-bowl that my wife had made. I noticed my reflection on the surface of the steaming tea. I was frightened by the images that shimmered through the steam: they seemed to forebode tragedy, pain, agony. The cup became the huge mouth of hell's dragon. I fought this image. Ronnie tuned into my dark predicament and picked up a drum and accompanied my battle with salvos of rhythms. I found my own drum and we conversed and played together. My wife, who at the time was in another room, told me later she thought that only one person was drumming.

Can a man who has looked into his own soul respect himself? Can he respect weakness, triviality, shame and fear? I was reworking my relationship with myself and felt somehow *fertilized* by the whole trip. A lasting calm enveloped me. A few days later, during our next therapy session, Laing observed that as we had talked, during the trip, about trust, hurt and kindness, he had seen a storm pass through my face. Once that was over, he said, he detected an ease and flow in my movements. He said also that he had noticed that during our LSD session my wife had not been as much at ease as the children, and we talked about how a family is like a mobile. If I change, he said, a change is imminent for my wife and children as well. Even if I were moving closer to her, she still has to adjust, and change implies anxiety. Change, a foray into the unknown, arouses the fear of life.

Since that trip with Laing, I have had many such significant, transformative experiences using entheogens, both as the one who takes the journey and as the one who attends, accompanies others. You may be asking: Why do it? What's to be gained?

I would like you to imagine walking up to the altar in a Catholic church and taking into your mouth the communion wafer. Imagine you are *experiencing* what this common ritual refers to. To know yourself to be a living cell in the body of Christ means to experience yourself as a tiny part of something much more, much greater than yourself. If a cell in my body, like Theudas, "boasting himself to be somebody" (*Acts 5:36*), suffered from an ego-mania, then it might separate away from the organizing principle of my being. We call such self-willed cells cancerous. If too many of my cells rebelled in this Satanic way, I would die.

The spiritual use of psychedelics is always in search of self-naughting¹³ and self-sacrifice. By the *self* here, I mean *ego* or *soul* or *psyche*. Since language, thought, the ability to speak are powers of the soul, at the moment of the soul's annihilation nobody remains to experience and nothing can be said about it. Leading up to this meltdown feels like dying, reconstituting oneself from nothing feels like rebirth. But the crucial point remains ineffable: it's blinding light, everything; it's total darkness, nothing; "the soul, in hot pursuit of God, becomes absorbed in Him . . . just as the sun will swallow up and put out the dawn" (*Meister Eckhart*). It's terrifying; it's bliss . . .

Leading up to this indescribable moment, one meets oneself, with all one's doubts, pretensions, heroics, defenses, habits, hopes and paranoias. Entheogens, carefully used, in the right setting, in the right frame of mind, allow your heart to fill with compassion. Towards yourself, as well as others. One learns to become more and more feminine, receptive, relaxed and balanced. It is most difficult to learn that there is nothing to be afraid of. Not even fear needs to be feared or avoided. One becomes no longer the victim, but the spectator of one's own fate. One realizes that the only proper function of the will is not to will. The task is to turn the will back upon itself, like the *Ouroboros*, the snake who eats its own tail, making room for surrender. "Nothing burns in hell but self-will. Therefore it is said, 'Put off thine own will, and there will be no hell'" (*Theologia Germanica*). If a trip goes bad, this is where it happens: willing anything other than what is happening precipitates one in hell. An experienced guide or sitter who is unafraid, because (s)he is familiar with the territory and has gained the trust of the one who struggles, can midwife one into surrender.

After the unspeakable, a warm surprise awaits one. Just as one can never get used to dying, the process of rebirth or reconstituting oneself is always an unexpected blessing. Regaining awareness of self and environment, I felt loved and whole and welcome in the world. After all, I could have been killed, and I wasn't, but I didn't

survive by my own clever efforts. I experience *mercy* and *humility*. Whatever guilt or shame made me hide before is burnt away: I have been forgiven. Love and Death are one person. I feel frail, tender, but safe: "The eternal God¹⁴ is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (*Deuteronomy 33:27*).

This sequence of dying=death (or nothingness) =rebirth is a universal pattern called *initiation*. The secret of initiation remains inviolable by its very nature; it cannot be betrayed because it cannot be expressed.

The worst trauma is betrayal. I have been betrayed and I have betrayed. Each time it happens, we contract, tense up and defend ourselves from further let-downs. And we begin to die of our defenses.

The use of entheogens in the safe container of psychotherapy can heal this wound, both in the patient and in the therapist. In each other's company we can find the Way "from privation to plenty, darkness to light, and death to immortality" (*Coomaraswamy*).

Entheogens, of course, are not the only way. There are many other pathways of engaging in the exploration of the same territory. In my practice I never suggest the possibility that therapy could encompass the use of entheogens. Similarly, I also abstain from suggesting going on, or coming off psychiatric medications. These decisions are all in the domain of my patients.

To illustrate the importance of *relationship* in doing entheogen-assisted psychotherapy, I will report a dream. Linda¹⁵ was 23 years old when she called me to ask if I would do LSD-therapy with her. I agreed to see her for an exploratory session, but I told her that normally I only do LSD-therapy within the context of ongoing psychotherapy. She impressed me as a strong-willed, impatient woman who wasn't afraid of anything. I ventured to say that perhaps she was rushing things. She agreed but justified her hurry by letting me know that she would be leaving for Europe shortly. Then she recounted a dream she had remembered from during the night preceding her appointment with me. She said, "I am meeting a therapist for the first time. We meet outdoors but I want more privacy, so we go to my place. We make love, but neither of us can orgasm. We remark on how unusual that is. We are constantly being interrupted by my family and others. There are four doors to my room, two of which I could lock, but the other two I had no keys for." I told her that I interpreted her dream as a warning from her unconscious: "Be careful, Linda, you don't know Andrew; the LSD experience may fizzle without peaking. You can't keep out your past, your world, and there won't be enough time to deal with it all. There will be too many distractions." Three days later she telephoned me to say that she had decided to try LSD alone, by herself. I wondered out loud, whether this was a decision

to further devalue *relationship*. I asked her to contemplate the differences between "making love" (*doing an LSD session within the context of on-going therapy*), "a quick fuck" (*doing LSD with a stranger*), and "masturbation" (*doing LSD alone*). She never contacted me again.

Earlier, I referred to the notion that seeking esoteric knowledge through the use of psychedelics might be a pact with the devil. Satan, or Lucifer, is an egomaniac, concerned with his own power, the power to defy, to control and to predict. The knowledge or certainty or *light* that Luci-fer *brings* is loveless. Satan delights in dogma and he is called the *tempter* because he distracts us with cleverness away from *The Kingdom of Heaven* that was promised to be *within* us. The desire to seek within is more and more lacking in our current world, and it isn't difficult to be led astray by false direction.

What to deplore and what to cherish? Are they necessarily incompatible? It seems to me that psychiatry with its pharmacological armamentarium is in much greater danger of selling its soul than entheogen-assisted psychotherapy. The two enterprises attract very different kinds of practitioners and patients. Our society of sex, capitalism and antidepressants is terrified of the dark. Laing named this fear of our own and other people's souls *psychophobia*. Psychiatry, aiming at control and prediction, is one response. Entheogen-assisted therapy, aiming at being with what is, in an open-hearted way, is another. *Caveat emptor . . .*

Endnotes

¹The word *entheogen* is used to describe certain plants and chemicals when used for spiritual purposes.

² A B.C. Registered Psychologist, I have been working in Vancouver as a psychotherapist in private practice, for over 30 years. I want to thank Meredith Feldmar, Lee Gass, Leon Redler, Norbert Ruebsaat, Oliver Sterczyk and Toby Worley for their help in editing, and commenting on, the drafts of this manuscript.

³ Antonio Machado

⁴ Anne Carson

⁵Novelist, author of *The Painted Bird*, *Being There*, etc.

⁶John Heaton, author of *Wittgenstein and Psychoanalysis*, a psychotherapist in London, wrote in response to this manuscript, "There is much criticism here [in Great Britain] of the Winnicottian belief that intimacy is crucial in therapy; sometimes yes, but also distance – is not separation an important part of human living?"

7 Scottish psychiatrist and author of *The Divided Self, Knots, etc.*

8 I use quotes from the *Bible* and other religious terms because the metaphysics of love calls for metaphors from the realm of the sacred. I could have used Hindu or Buddhist texts just as effectively, but I thought Judeo-Christian images would be more familiar.

9 I sent this manuscript to Dr. Pylyshyn and he wrote: "Your essay brought back memories – not all of which agree with yours in detail. For example I don't remember GIVING you the LSD and if I had, it would not have been 900 micrograms but only 100 (I think you got the LSD yourself). I also don't feel that I was as uninvolved in your maiden voyage as you imply. One never shepherds someone through such a trip without being on a lot of it oneself. I may not have gotten into your head as much as you got into mine, but you were not so far away. Not being high does mean that one's critical faculties are on guard more, so I would not have allowed myself to believe I was sharing your thoughts – the way I did when I was on a very special trip with Duncan Blewett and Neil Agnew. That one did deserve your descriptive term, *mind-interlock* (or Richard Bucke's term, *cosmic consciousness*). This particular experience, more than anything else about the trip, has remained with me as a message that it was at least occasionally possible to break through the mist of aloneness that we seem to be sentenced to. The other lesson I learned is one you also describe when you quote *Theologia Germanica* and add, ". . .willing anything other than what is happening precipitates one in hell." I learned that when monsters come at you (and as an anxiety-laden person, I can hardly avoid them coming at me) the worst thing you can do is try to run away. That's the controller's thing to do. The only thing that helps is to remember that they are YOUR monsters and to look them into their teeth and admire that part of yourself that can create them! You also say something like this when you talk about dying of your own defenses. These are good phrases for me.

"But these are thoughts that rarely occur to me these days. I have built a well-fashioned edifice of defenses through my rational control. I don't think that is a bad thing – we survive the horror of pointlessness in whatever way we must. I have not even had marijuana for many years. *Entheogens* are useful for just the reason you say. Not because they enable you to SEE more clearly, but because they represent a letting go of some piece of control, so you can see that Monsters-R-Us (as Pogo said, we have met the enemy and he is us)."

10 "Set and setting" refers to mind set and physical locale. Stanislav Grof, in *LSD Psychotherapy* (1980) provides the following definition: "the subject's understanding of the effects of the drug and purpose of ingestion, their general approach to the experience, and the physical and interpersonal elements of the situation."

11 John Heaton, mentioned above, observed, "I am sure LSD can be helpful but I am very doubtful about so-called experiencing one's birth and conception. There is a clinic a mile or so from me that gives experience of birth, conception and analyzes one's previous lives. An expensive and long process; I and others have seen many who have gone through this and have not been impressed. In fact some of these patients become extremely resentful, for although they have had all these experiences they are as unhappy as ever. This is an increasing chorus in this country against therapists who promise various experiences but which seem to be of little benefit in the long run. Also, the threat of legal action is increasing against therapists who give promises that they do not fulfill."

12 Most people who knew R. D. Laing referred to him as *Ronnie*.

13 Rumi wrote, "Whoever enters there, saying 'It is I,' I [God], smite him in the face." Also, "What is Love? Thou shalt know when *thou* becomest *me*."

14 All references to god and other religious terminology are meant metaphorically. Often "God" stands for "nature" or "life."

15 Not her real name.