

The high road

New research makes a case for psychedelic drugs offering profound spiritual experiences

BY ANNE BOKMA

It was called the Good Friday Experiment, and in the annals of psychedelic research, it's a doozy. In 1962, 20 theological students gathered at Marsh Chapel on the campus of Boston University for a two-and-a-half-hour worship service. They were part of a double-blind study, designed by Harvard Divinity School graduate student Walter Pahnke under the direction of Harvard psychology professor Timothy Leary, to test whether psychedelics could induce spiritual experiences among believers.

Half were given 30 milligrams of psilocybin (the active ingredient in “magic mushrooms”) and the other half a placebo. The study passed the acid test with flying colours: almost all the students who took the drug reported mind-blowing spiritual experiences.

In a 25-year followup, the subjects, several of whom became ministers, continued to characterize the event as one of the high points of their spiritual lives. One participant later called it “the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced.”

The groundbreaking study became the most famous proof of the spiritual effects of psychedelics. Soon after, Leary was fired, and within a few years, the U.S. government declared a war on drugs and shut down such research. The Good Friday Experiment would become the last of its kind for decades.

Now, 50 years later, there's a revival of credible research from leading academic and medical centres on the potential for psychedelics to treat everything from addiction to post-traumatic stress disorder. Roland Griffiths, a professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences at John Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, has found that administering psy-

chedelics, known as entheogens when being used for spiritual effects, can create profound experiences.

In his 2006 study, 36 volunteers who had never taken psychedelics before were given psilocybin. Twenty-two subjects reported a “complete” mystical experience, and two-thirds ranked it as one of the most spiritually significant experiences of their lives.

The sacramental use of psychedelics has a centuries-long history in Aboriginal communities, and they may even be the cause of certain biblical miracles. Benny Shanon, a retired psychology professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has posited that Moses was likely in an altered state of awareness from a hallucinogenic drug — perhaps a brew of leaves from the acacia tree, a known psychedelic

frequently mentioned in the Bible — when he observed the burning bush and also when he received the Ten Commandments. (Their recreational use has been associated with psychosis, flashbacks and suicide.)

Mark Haden, chair of the Canadian branch of the Multi-disciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, believes these substances will be legalized for therapeutic and spiritual use during his lifetime (he's 60). He envisions a college of psychedelics where licensed practitioners, including therapists and spiritual leaders, will dispense them — perhaps even in houses of worship. “Churches offer the experience of spirituality, and psychedelics can be part of that experience,” he says. The best part, he adds, is that they provide experiences tailor-made for diverse beliefs: “Christians can meet the Christ, Buddhists the Buddha and atheists the universe.”

Derek Snider, a 42-year-old Toronto computer programmer, says if the church offered opportunities for such transcendent experiences, he might still be going. The founder of the Entheogenic Research Guild of Toronto, an online meetup group, Snider was a member of a United Church congregation in Guelph, Ont., for years but says he grew weary of institutional religion because it has “replaced the fostering of personal spiritual experience of the Divine with ritual and dogma.”

Today he turns to the occasional cup of ayahuasca brew for spiritual enlightenment. It provides him with “a connection with the infinite,” followed by feelings of “gratitude, relief, renewal and bliss.” It's a lot like going to a church, he says. “Except church only lasts an hour and includes a lot of readings and rituals, while the actual praying and reflecting parts are only a few minutes. What I get to experience can last for hours.”

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