



TRANSPERSONAL COUNSELING: SOME OBSERVATIONS REGARDING ENTHEOGENS

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to give a testimonial for Myron Stolaroff's protocol, because I had the privilege of being one of the subjects in his research with entheogens at the Foundation for Advanced Study in 1965. I was happy to meet Myron here for the first time and to have the opportunity to express my gratitude to him for making that experience possible for me.

More than thirty years ago, I had the good fortune to attend a lecture by Huston Smith in which he spoke about the phenomenological identity between the natural mystical experience and the entheogenic experience. There I met Jim Fadiman, who asked if I would like to be a subject in the research project, under Myron Stolaroff's direction, at the Foundation in Menlo Park. After careful screening, we were given a high dose of LSD combined with mescaline. Then we relaxed and listened to selected music, wearing earphones and eyeshades, under the supervision of a well-trained psychiatrist. That experience changed my life.

I had unwittingly prepared for this by studying comparative religions, humanities, and philosophy at Stanford as an undergraduate. I realized that although the research project experience had not changed my worldview, it affirmed what I understood about religion and philosophy, particularly existentialism. I had written a senior thesis on the concept of freedom in Gabriel Marcel's work, but now I felt I understood freedom in a new way. Although I cannot begin to express the full depth of that profound mystical experience in words, one insight can be encapsulated in the words, "The truth shall make

you free." Another revelation was that love is at the heart of the universe, or that God is Love. Since then, my spiritual journey has been partly about learning to live with awareness of love and freedom.

Soon afterwards I went back to graduate school and earned a degree in clinical psychology, in an effort to understand more about my experience and how the mind works. When research with entheogens became virtually illegal, some of us who were interested in this research looked for other ways of working with the psyche. I became interested in depth psychotherapy, and this has occupied my professional life for most of the last thirty years. During this time I have learned much about a variety of altered state experiences from the people I have worked with, who have shared their struggles, hopes, and fears.

In the sixties many of us believed (or hoped) that the world was really changing, and that if everyone could have an entheogen experience the world would be transformed. We soon learned that this was not the case, and that not everyone benefits from the use of entheogens. Certainly one's perception of the world can be altered, but unless a person has the psychological maturity to integrate such experience, it can be problematic.

DISCERNMENT

I think we should consider the following questions regarding the use of entheogens: What is wise use of these powerful substances? What are skillful means for the use of these tools that profoundly alter consciousness? Who benefits and who is at risk?

I think the importance of set and setting, the training of the guide, the psychological health of the subject, and the intention of the people involved should be carefully considered. If they were, I doubt that we would see so many problems stemming from misuse, or that we would have so much remedial work to do in transpersonal counseling.

Psychologists are not necessarily trained to work in this area. When I studied the psychology of C.G. Jung, I found that analytical psychology was not a big enough container for the full range of potential experiences. Then I began to explore transpersonal psychology, where the spectrum of consciousness is more encompassing. Transpersonal psychology does not hinge on the insights of any one single person, but draws on the work of a number of people. I have been particularly inspired by the work of Ken Wilber and Stanislav Grof. What I have found useful in my clinical practice is having a cognitive framework that helps people make sense of their non-ordinary experiences, whether or not they are entheogen induced. While some experiences may

be interpreted in the context of a particular religion, they do not necessarily have to fit into a religious framework in order to be understood. For me, the transpersonal field has provided a broad psychological and spiritual context for understanding what is happening in the psyche, be it in dreams, ordinary waking life, or non-ordinary states of consciousness.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

I think the distinction between spirituality and religion is very important. I refer to spirituality as a subjective experience of the sacred, whereas religion usually refers to an organized institution that provides a creed, a code of ethics, and community rituals for believers. Religion may or may not provide a supportive structure for a person's spiritual life. Spirituality is by no means the exclusive property of any religion. It occurs inside religions and outside of religions, as a natural impulse that exists in the hearts and minds of people everywhere. Spirituality may be theistic or non-theistic or polytheistic. For example, it is polytheistic in Hinduism and shamanism; theistic in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; and nontheistic in Buddhism. I have found this awareness to be helpful in counseling people, whether or not they have a religious worldview.

The difference between a pastoral counselor and a transpersonal psychologist has sometimes been attributed to disillusionment with formal training. The pastoral counselor, disillusioned with religion, turns to psychology – often psychoanalysis – for answers, while the transpersonal psychologist, disillusioned with conventional psychology, turns to spirituality for answers. The work of pastoral counselors is certainly valuable but does not usually extend to counseling in relation to psychoactive substances. While pastoral counselors work within a particular religious framework, I would define a transpersonal psychologist as someone who works in an ecumenical spiritual context that is not limited to one particular religious orientation.

THE SHADOW SIDE OF ENTHEOGENS

I want to mention some of the problems that I have observed associated with the use of entheogens. If we evaluate the experience in a developmental framework, we see that while it may facilitate change and alter perceptions of self and others, it does not necessarily contribute to psychological maturity or to increased compassion or tolerance in an enduring way. In other words, the entheogenic experience does not necessarily advance a person's cognitive or moral development. In my work, I attempt to help people understand and

integrate their experiences in an effort to realize their healing potentials. When people fail to integrate an experience, there are at least two types of pitfalls: 1) they may repress the experience, deny it, and pretend that it never happened; or 2) they may become addicted to the experience and more interested in repeating it than in changing the quality of their lives. Finding a way that enables a person to use these sacramentals in a manner that enhances psychological development and spiritual growth is both a challenge and a responsibility.

There could be value in having entheogens available electively in the training of psychologists and other mental health professionals and divinity school students. I think some of those who want to be priests, pastors, or counselors might benefit significantly from having direct experience of these altered states. This might foster their own growth and enhance their empathy and understanding of what other people may go through in the growth process. For anyone struggling with psychological addiction, there is much work to be done in finding ways of reducing dependency on altered states.

PREPARATION

Counseling sessions were of value to me, and I think could be of value to others, in preparation for the deep experience. We were given psychological tests and encouraged to read Alpert, Leary, and Metzner's rendition of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. All this contributed to providing a supportive set and setting. In this context, viewing these experiences as tools for psychological and spiritual growth seemed vitally important.

In my work as a psychotherapist I have emphasized growth-oriented therapy rather than a medical model of cure for pathology. Growth-oriented work is a process where these substances can sometimes be valuable. Entheogenic experiences seem to be potentially helpful for people who benefit from "uncovering" types of therapy, but certainly not everyone benefits from them. I have also seen entheogens exacerbate pathologies such as narcissism or borderline conditions. Obviously, not only healthy people are drawn to the use of these substances.

This brings us to another issue that needs to be addressed: Who are the best candidates? When does the potential benefit outweigh the risk, and *vice-versa*? I remember reading in the literature – and it is true in my experience – that people who benefit most from the entheogenic experience are those who have a strong, healthy ego. It is easier to transcend a healthy ego than a weak ego. For people who need structure-building therapy, psychoactive substances would probably be contraindicated. These questions need to be addressed in

developing guidelines for skillful and wise use of these sacramentals. Like any powerful tool, the entheogens can be enormously beneficial, and high risks are also associated with them.

CONCLUSION

Two things that have been useful for me, and could be useful for others doing inner work, are having a source of inner guidance and finding the ability to trust oneself. This may involve learning to trust your intuition, or learning to pray or focus attention as in meditation. Traditional spiritual practices can be beneficial for this learning. I like the definition of an atheist as a person of no invisible means of support! In transpersonal counseling, clients are encouraged to find the inner resources that are best suited to them.

Perhaps our continuing dialogue can help us discern more clearly: When is an experience with entheogens appropriate? How is it appropriate? For whom is it appropriate? What are the best ways of initiating people into a wider view of other dimensions of reality? And – something that has been mentioned before – what is the purpose? Clarifying intentions can make a significant difference to the outcome.