

BECOMING THE VINE

An Anecdotal Account of an Ayahuasca Initiation

Iona Miller, ©1994
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ABSTRACT: Peruvian shaman and Jesuit priest, Don Augustin, has made annual visits from his homeland to Europe and the United States to conduct ayahuasca journeys for some years now. Most recently he has been appointed ambassador to Austria, and is by necessity limiting the week-long session he so generously guides. He offers an initiatory experience which many yearn to try, seeking healing and an expanded sense of self. What they find seems to transform their core selves, even while revealing the 'no-self.' The emergent sense of communal telepathic communication -- with nature, spirit, the shaman and other participants -- supersedes any particular chemistry inherent within *banisteriopsis caapi* (DMT) or the other optional ingredients used to concoct each unique ayahuasca brew.

With sessions limited to around 30 people, each seeker is hand-picked by the shaman using criteria known only to him. The subject of this man-in-the-street report had no previous psychedelic experience, no history of drug use or abuse, and therefore came to the session free of contaminating expectations. He was invited through his long-term participation in Native American sundancing in North Dakota and sweat lodge ceremonies on the northern California coast with a Lakota elder and pipe carrier, Jaime.

The aspirants were instructed to prepare for their experience through fasting, prayer and vision quest. While this purification wasn't mandatory, the tone or quality of the journey seems to be facilitated by the commitment of the consciousness explorer. As in most inner journeys, you get out of the experience what you put into it. As in all psychedelic states, surrender of the ego and flowing with the experience is crucial.

A naturally shamanic personality has the possibility of "*becoming the vine*" as the draught flows through body and soul, liquefying consciousness. Its tendrils permeate and weave through the psyche, manifesting in its caressing or strangling grip the mystery of the wounded-healer. The ayahuasca shaman is said to acquire skin like the bark of the plant as well as embody its inner qualities.

Introduction

"[Yage or ayahuasca] is actually a drink, a mixture of several different plants... Depending on what the shaman wants to facilitate in terms of the experience, he takes a bit of this leaf; with another experience he takes a little bit of a different leaf or flower. They have a highly developed understanding of the synergy of these plants that in various combinations can facilitate the kind of healing experience they want to produce for an individual."

--Thomas Pinkson, *PM & E*, Vol. VI

Songs of the Magical Vine

The latest fads in eco-tourism are now threatening the few remaining remote, sacred places and practices "green" tourists revere, even as the global community becomes more aware of the value of primal shamanic culture. The pressure of tourists flocking to these centers has created environmental pressures and opened these tourists to exploitation by unscrupulous charlatans who are neither therapeutic nor spiritual. Gullible people seeking a dramatic experience are at the mercy of these imposters who have even been reported to mix blinding brews of jungle plants.

Yet, none of this diminishes in any way the power of a true ayahuasca initiation by a skilled shaman. Consciousness journeys do not necessarily require us to move bodily to some far-off sacred place. Instead their initiatory energy prompts us to travel toward the sacred within ourselves, through direct participation in multiples states of consciousness. Just as the shamans experience their journeys in their native environment, so can we, because mentally we are in an expanded reality that perceives no experiential boundaries of time, locale, or personal identity. Self-image liquefies and consciousness is free to creatively explore a myriad of forms.

Whether induced by psychedelic substances or experiential therapy, these soul journeys express and manifest our essence through the dynamic panoply of symbolic imagery. For example, of the four elements--earth, air, fire, and water. As consciousness identifies with each, it is transmuted in the crucible of chaos, alternately enflamed and cooled, blown by a tempest or whirlwind and then grounded. Jung called the symbol-forming power of the psyche the transcendent function. Requiring no interpretation or analysis, multi-sensory images facilitate transition from one set of attitudes to the next.

From time immemorial shamans have guided their people through visions of chaos, healing them and promoting a sense of personal and communal integrity. Jeanne Achterberg called shamanism "the medicine of the imagination." This poison/panacea is a gift from the irrational forces of life. Imagination is our most powerful force for change, the primary way we experience soul through multiple states of consciousness. Meaning dwells in images like consciousness dwells in the body. Experience within this realm of imagination is a "virtual reality" with consequences in the "real" world.

If it is the task of the shaman to retrieve and restore the lost soul of the journeyer, he need only reconnect them with imaginative life to set the healing in motion. Human personality is in constant mystical motion, seeking meaning inwardly and outwardly. In the passage through the inner depths, the psychic crisis of an individual seeks its unique solution. Consciousness experiences itself as "one with all."

There is an infinity of realities and states of consciousness. Shamanism facilitates those which help us let go of the focus of attention and enter into chaos, then seize the new order that self-organizes and arises from it--spiritual rebirth, holistic re-creation. Rebirth establishes the dominion of Spirit over all the activities of personality, and manifests as willingness to be reborn every day.

Roughly translated, ayahuasca means "vine of the dead," or "vine of souls." Its active ingredients include beta-carbolines, including harmine. "The vine is the jungle," according to the teachings of the elders. Therefore this most Amazonian of plants works not only in South America, but wherever ordinary consciousness die and that spirit comes alive, sprouting from the grounding force of the shaman, him or herself, and permeating the group-mind of all participants. In fact, an experienced shaman symbolically becomes the essence of the vine, itself.

The skin and veins of the guide take on the appearance of the bark of the woody climbing liana, as the identification process (participation mystique) becomes more and more vividly manifest. One opens to the spirit of the plant over time. Even first-time aspirants often experience a glimpse of this emergent consciousness of the wild jungle of the primal psyche, and if their purifications have been successful it is a "clear" one. It produces an abiding reverence for nature.

Typically, most of the ayahuasca hallucinations are "organic" or natural forms, opening one to the expanded sense of flowing and merging with nature. They are earthy and dark with scintillating impressions of color and life erupting from the darkness-surrealistic spiders, butterflies, and serpentine forms. One naturally "becomes" each of the hallucinatory elements, living each as an initiation--an emotional reality. This natural tendency is exploited in the "drug-free shamanism" of experiential therapy where we encourage the journeyer to "become" the essence of vital elements of the dynamic psychic imagery.

As with all psychedelics, psychic tensions can create blocks within the flow of ayahuasca visions. Hyperarousal can lead to anxiety, and block the way to ecstatic states. Spiritual preparation minimizes abreactions within the altered state. Thus, one unprepared (unpurified) participant experienced and described his visions as characteristically "plastic," (rather than organic). He also expressed more psychophysical distress. His visions were still filtered through the dross of personal baggage, failure to truly surrender or "let go" of old patterns.

Conversely, where traumas might be expected to remanifest in hallucinations, they are often transmuted and healed in the archetypal process of dissolution, holistic repatterning, and rebirth. The mind lets go of its rational order, enters into unstructured chaos and emerges with a new structure. Within the transformative chaos visions are begotten of the harmony of things, as well as inspiration and intuition.

Initiation is a process of starting over, a simulation and reiteration of the Creation Myth. Therefore, it means going into primal chaos beyond matter-energy-spacetime to begin the process of reformation from the most fundamental condition. Healing the total organism involves yielding the diseased form or image to the primal creative states (formless chaos) and subsequently emerging from it with a new, more harmonious and balanced form. Through creativity, new forms emerge from the void. Thus, healing is an act of creation, a holistic activity. So are intuition, equilibrium, intimacy, and compassion.

Since beta-carbolines are legal, according to McKenna (1992), *ayahuasqueros* may practice their healing rites with impunity, as do their chosen consciousness explorers.

McKenna also reports DMT-containing plants in the hallucinogenic brew. They amplify and augment one another, exploiting a pharmacological mechanism called MAO inhibition. DMT crosses the blood-brain barrier and bonds to the same synaptic sites as serotonin, much like LSD, but when ingested rather than smoked, it lasts hours longer. Other typical additions to the visionary elixir include Indian tobacco and iris.

Ayahuasca is also known as *telepathine*. Empathic drugs, such as MDA and XTC ("ecstasy" or MDMA) open us to the feelings of others and naked, "game-free" compassionate emotional reality. Yage opens us to boundary-dissolving visionary hallucinations, the inner wilderness, the interpenetrating thoughts of others in the group, as well as to the observation by and guidance of the presiding shaman.

The state is one of conscious transparency. This telepathic power is not limited by locale. The shaman, far from home, claims to communicate with his family, living and dead, as well as his charges. Reports of astral projection and other psychic phenomena by the participants are typical rather than isolated. Psi events are characteristic of the psychedelic state in general, but ayahuasca accentuates and facilitates telepathy, in particular.

The binding agent of the group and the essence of the experience lies within the lyrical melodies woven by the shaman through healing songs revealed to him over the course of his shamanic practice. The *icaros*, or curing songs, are truly magical to one in the psychedelic or ecstatic state, adding pattern and rhythm to the visions. Thus, the shaman focuses, enfolds, and keeps each journeyer secure.

The larger his healing musical repertoire, the greater the shaman is revered. The songs and verbal suggestions to "surrender and flow with the experience," drive, direct or guide the hallucinatory process. There are purposeful disruptions and interventions by the shaman which cause the hallucinating subject to go blank, freeing them of whatever attachments were in mind.

On the other hand, all rituals contain their ordeals. Ayahuasca, also called *la purga*, is a strong purgative which can induce not just heaving, but projectile vomiting. Therefore, the injunctions -- refrain from meat and other heavy foods, refrain from smoking, fast and practice sexual abstinence to purify the psychobiological system -- are best heeded.

Purification is ignored at one's psychological and spiritual peril and demonstrates the validity of the axiom that we are what we eat, literally and figuratively. Heavens and hells originate within ourselves. One must undergo the initiatory ordeals to receive the boon of healing. How else can we know our own courage in the face of life and death?

Vision Quest and Medicine Wheel

The medicine wheel is the primary healing model of western shamanism. It symbolizes the synergy of chaos and order, spirit and matter. This sacred circle has four primary stations, corresponding to the four cardinal direction, and four elements (earth, air, fire and water). It is therefore a mythic model of the creation and a device

for magical orientation, purification, and protection. Its mandala-shaped motif lays out the phase of a healing process:

1). INITIATION corresponds with the East and psychologically means recognition, insight, or seeing the problem and the need for healing, breaking through inertia, dormancy, latency, ignorance, or denial. The keyword is Arousal.

2). LETTING GO corresponds to the South, and means surrendering to the Higher Power, spirit, or the transformational process. This ego-death leads directly into a period of primal chaos before the new visions is found. The keyword is Conception.

3). NEW VISION arises within the place of dreams and creative imagination. Self esteem is expressed in creative solutions, connecting with spiritual powers without and within which are seen as One. Guiding visions "work" because we are not separate from the universe, nature, each other, our bodies, or hidden aspects of ourselves. It is the West; keyword Gestation.

4). ACTUALIZATION is a phase of fruition, integration, empowerment. In the North quadrant you make your dreams come true. Rebirth heralds a new emotional maturity. Newly-learned skills and intuition are put into fruitful practice, connecting one to self, community, and Universe, restoring balance and rectifying karma. The Rebirth experience symbolizes the renewal of perpetual potential.

The Session

In this particular journey, the subject is a recovering PTSD veteran of the Vietnam war who has engaged in numerous healing sweats, vision quests, firewalking, and sundancing. With a great deal of reverence for the Red Road, he comes to this new shamanic experience as a singular psychedelic event at midlife, with no history of recreational drug use or abuse. The week-long journey recreates the prototypical journey of the archetypal hero, as well as personal elements of the wounded healer.

The preparation culminating in the ayahuasca ceremony involved a purification period of pilgrimage, celibacy, sweats, vegetarian diet, and fasting. A wilderness area was chosen where the medicine wheel was bounded by natural landmarks. To the north lay "sasquatch" country; in the East, granite mountain peaks with deep, clear lakes. In the south A Sonoran desert volcanic peak arose in the direction where dream visions indicated water would be found in a naked walkabout. The flight of falcons, far from their natural ecological niche led to the discovery of an ancient archaeological site, which contained not only a petrified log, but human-worked chert. To the west lay the setting sun.

This entire ayahuasca ceremony took place over a week of training and contact with the shaman Don Augustin. But in reality, it begins far before one's arrival or pilgrimage with "the call" to adventure. This call echoes the aeons old theme of the heroic quest -- a pancultural myth of departure and return.

Each hero or heroine crosses a threshold into another reality and meets the guardian of that threshold, undergoes symbolic dismemberment (psychic fragmentation, torment)

of the personality, journeys through a threatening, unfamiliar world with magical helpers and many tests and trials.

Taking the risk and meeting the challenge, with the grace of spiritual intervention, leads to a sense of atonement, enlargement, freedom. We have to battle our own limitations, press against and transcend our fears, pain and boundaries. But we can return from the journey with the "treasure hard to attain," the elixir of life, a indescribable boon, an "inner marriage," or empowerment.

Our stories have the power to move others. Therefore, part of the larger value of these experiences is sharing the experience letting other know it's OK to take a risk, psychologically and spiritually. Yet the personal details of the visionary experience are for the self alone, and telling them may dissipate the transformative quality contained in their essence.

There is a parallel between the phases of the heroic quest and the process of personal transformation and healing encountered in therapy and shamanism. "Dream journeys," whether induced by suggestion or magical potions, provide permission to immerse oneself in the fluidic imagery of the dynamic stream of consciousness, to pay attention and deeply focus on the rich panoply spontaneously emerging all the time from the deepest ground of our nature. Through such journeys we learn to navigate in the wilderness of the primal psyche -- to actively engage mythic reality.

The process, like the Medicine Wheel, typically includes four stages: a prelude, altered state, healing phase and postlude.

Prelude

First, there is a trigger. One sees or senses that there is a problem and this insight may involve physical problems or symptoms, alienation, unresolved issues, spiritual malaise. We sense an invitation to the journey, a "call" from the unknown, an invitation into the deeper mysteries of existence and Reality, into a multidimensional experience of the issue. We can only begin to heal when we realize that healing is needed and understand the nature of the crisis. This first stage is the only one in which the ordinary ego is involved and leads toward the next step of the healing process, entering into the transpersonal.

Answering the call, willingly or unwillingly leads toward withdrawal to undisturbed internal solitude (sanctuary). Resisted it can lead to depression, and this depression is often what drives people into seeking help through psychotherapy or unconventional means.

Identification of the problem (where you are dis-eased) is the psychological equivalent of confession. It is a natural part of the "letting go" process.

Then comes a period of "pilgrimage" and purification which can include celibacy, incubation of dreams and visions, and cultivation of shamanic ecstatic techniques (prayer, sweats, fasting, exercise, music, drumming, dancing, physical hardship, ordeals, dream quest). Purification expresses the sacrifice of self as an offering to spirit as a token of total commitment.

The vision quest and other ceremonies confuse and boggle the mind or intellect allowing the irrational in. Ego relinquishes "control." They remind us of something we already have within ourselves. This process culminates in concentration on or calling forth of transpersonal power or our muse with full expectation of results. When we knock on that door, the teacher appears.

Spiritual preparation/indoctrination by the shaman includes an orientation, worldview of transpersonal realities, anecdotes of other journeys and healing experiences, collection and preparation of fresh ingredients with the shaman. In this case some ingredients were brought by the shaman in his medicine bag and fresh ingredients were procured at the florist. Then the bark is carved into chips and the brew prepared. Not all participants engage in this preparatory phase with the shaman, but as in any healing process, you get out of it what you put into it. The more immersion in the atmosphere of the experience, the more profound the results are likely to be.

Altered State

Echoing the natural healing process as embodied in the Medicine Wheel, the ceremony itself initiates the process of letting go of ordinary consciousness and entering the realm of the uncanny and divine. It is a time of shedding the familiar old self and opening to the unknown.

The process leads through purges of pain and fear, entering the maelstrom and vulnerability of the transformation. This stage requires more than faith in the shaman and the divine. It requires faith in our organism's ability to heal, self regulate, and survive. The energy of the illness must be shattered and transformed into the renewed life and emergent energy.

This process is equivalent to a near-death experience of the psychophysical self. The body under the psychedelic influence may not be in immanent peril, but the psychophysical self is in upheaval and ego-death is certain, and essential for rebirth to occur. The ego crosses the threshold and must submit and willingly participate in its own destruction through transcendence, and the whole organism open to consciousness of the absolute--outside of space/time, infinite boundaries.

Most psychedelics produce similar reactions at this phase, though not all of them are purgatives like ayahuasca. In native cultures this served a purposeful healing function, ridding the system of parasites and worms, but even without them it is a profound emptying which is also psychic in nature. It prepares the vessel for the divine influx. For many, it is a journey through "*the valley of the shadow of death.*"

In the visionary state the prototype of solution is sensed which grows into the multisensory image; ideas spontaneously flow. The same natural creative process can manifest in a variety of modes. In healing, the desired visualized condition is manifested by the guidance of the healer; in creativity the inspiration is realized as a specific form or expression; in illumination, the emotions are overwhelmed by forceful influxes, ecstasies and grace.

The healer guides the sojourners through periods of darkness into the light. With enhanced senses they enter a dreamworld of amplified sensitivity to self, others, and

nature -- the realm of the spirit. They journey not only through the darkened landscape, but through the inner perils and secret places of the selfscape.

The altered state is a gestalt of multisensory imagery, telepathic dialogue, and transcendence. The reality of the self shines through transparently, and may provide glimpses of the future. There are profound feelings of oneness, bliss and wholeness. A new image of who we are begins to emerge from deep within. Both physiological and mental dynamics are being restructured. The old self is unbound, free of habitual patterns and chronic ailments.

The reality of the self shines through transparently. Soul is redeemed through the continuous creative process. The visions culminate in the sense of self-luminosity. One's very veins or subtle energy channels seem to glow.

Visions alternate between states of arousal and transcendence. In enflament the sympathetic nervous system is energized. This is expressed in hot flashes, and periods of anger or rage. This active state is mediated by noradrenaline, and creates a visionary plenum. In transcendence no thoughts arise when the mind is fixed on pure essence. This parasympathetic arousal is mediated by serotonin and manifests as hypoarousal such as relaxation and satiety. It is a serene passive state where one empties and hears the voice of the silence and feels tremendous love, and perhaps a sense of Presence. Journeyers report radiant forms, white glow, which are often interpreted as spiritual forms of the the White Lady or Blessed Virgin Mary, where this cultural form is revered.

The Healing State

Traditionally the healing state is associated with the healing snake, perhaps a symbolic allusion to the Central Nervous System. The most familiar animal spirit linked with ayahuasca visions is the serpent. It is the essence of the woody vine embodied in animal form. Its healing wisdom may appear within an interactive dialogue ("it told me"), or intuitions, and spontaneous behavior.

The ultimate vision facilitated by the divine vine is that of a boa constrictor, which is considered to be the vine's "mother spirit." This entity is perceived as providing protection, healing of emotional and physical problems, and divining the future. Expressing great reverence for the experience, this divine serpent indicates that ayahuasca rituals are the Amazonian version of an archetypal healing "snake cult."

Snakes have always played a prominent role in mysticism. Worldwide the snake is associated through ancient practices with healing, dreams, and visions. In ancient Greece, the python -- another constrictor -- was the sacred healer in the healing cult of Asklepios. It appears on the winged Caduceus of Hermes and we see it still used today as the symbol of our medical associations. This archetypal association is reflected in the eastern notion of Kundalini serpent power, or life force. Ayahuasca certainly awakens this slumbering serpent, giving it wings to take flight.

The divine snake embodies the serpentine flow of raw life energies, pure energy itself. The fundamental nature of snakes is that they must shed their old constricting skins many times in order to grow. They symbolize rejuvenation or the process of

death/rebirth. This and other metaphors of its existence and essence (sinuous movement, underground life, etc.) make it a pregnant symbol. According to the symbolist Cirlot, "*Snakes are the guardians of the springs of immortality, and also of those superior riches of the spirit that are symbolized by hidden treasure.*"

However, it is not knowing about the archetypal nature of this serpent power that is important, but direct experiential knowledge in the unitive sense of the word. In the Asklepiian cult, just the appearance of a snake in the dream signals an epiphany with the god and heralds the healing process. It requires no interpretation nor analysis. It is much the same in the dreamworld of the ayahuasca ceremonies -- the communion is an epiphany. Healing is what is communicated.

In this paradigm, healing arises from within, and the person seeking healing takes an active role in the process. Flowing with the experience through the progression of multisensory images provides the serpentine pathway to healing. Nature and wilderness invite flow and merging with the spirit. Visceral, instinctual, and intuitive responses involve the whole organism in a highly creative state of consciousness.

Postlude

Reentry implies rebirth -- the self-organizing emergence of the new self. The seed of initiation is realized as the mature fruit of experience, which feeds and sustains us. The experience continues to be useful in our lives. Each healing journey is the death of something within us which has kept us stuck or stultified; healing facilitates our continuing evolution. The new self continues to emerge and the consequences of the journey become embodied in this new form for months and even years after the journey. They are manifested in new behaviors, feelings, attitudes, ideas, and wisdom. Thus the circle of life continues unbroken.

Don Augustin takes great care to debrief his sojourners after their experience, and in this case he chose to separately debrief molest victims giving them extra care and attention. He also emphasized that networking with others who shared the journey can be helpful. Some participants, including our subject, participated in building a massive fire with criss-crossed oak logs which led to a firewalk for some of those who were drawn toward it.

Keywords expressed by participants included joy, reassurance, oneness, goodness, equanimity, inner security, sense of destiny and spiritual vocation, attachment to one's own creative center, the heavenly heart, and becoming the embodiment of the greater Self. For many this was a step on the journey to consolidation of discontinuous encounters with self into a steady state of mystical transparency.

The Embodied Heart

The psychological history of our subject included post-traumatic stress and psychophysical pain acquired as a medic in Vietnam. He had been wounded as well as exposed to Agent Orange, and disturbed tremendously by the brutality and carnage of the experience at a very young age. These traumas exacerbated trust issues and suppressed rage acquired as the child of an abusive alcoholic father.

Blocked by a confusion of pain and pleasure, this person sought fantasy relief through a death wish, acted out through risk-taking behavior in extreme sports. At midlife (42) now and open to change, he had also sought individual and relationship therapy for improving adjustment and communication around feelings, intimacy and trust. In previous sessions he had perceived his heart metaphorically as being outside of his chest, exposed and vulnerable, without a home within.

One of his main fears, as an alcohol and drug-free individual with no previous psychedelic experience, was that the Vietnam trauma might be relived during the session, and exacerbate his PTSD. This might have easily been the case without skillful guidance and loving care. However, he had been participating for many years in weekly sweat lodge rebirth ceremonies. We may speculate that these gentler introductions to the rebirth process served as excellent preparation for the compelling psychedelic journey.

The psychedelic vision led to an experience of having the top of his head screwed off by certain "elf-like" entities. His head emitted a white rainbow which the creatures determined meant "this one is basically all right." But then, they screwed his head back on just a little crooked. The subject became aware that the shaman and other participants realized this oddly funny fact telepathically, finding it quite humorous. Having one's "head screwed on crooked" is certainly a good metaphor of shamanic consciousness, and he has since gone on to become an "intercessor" following the Red Road.

In any event, no replay of the old trauma occurred. Since yage is hallucinogenic at high doses, its purification is a near-death experience, or very close to it. The process itself is traumatic and visceral in the extreme. This journeyer reports "seeing" death personified, as indeed he had when blown up in war. But there is now no fear, rather reassurance that the time is not now . . . death awaits patiently. (Note: the description of this personification of death by the subject is remarkably similar to the god Bwiti, described by African shamans of the Fang! tribe under the influence of psychoactive iboga).

Having successfully navigated this personality transforming leap into the raging torrent of psychophysical imagery, he now feels more confident, more self-assured, more connected, perhaps even safer than in a long time. Meeting the challenge, facing his fear, he found a new sense of clarity, of being healthier than he might have thought.

His heart once again dwells within and the motivating pain which drove the impulse for self-destruction evaporated as the death-wish disappeared in greater self-acceptance and conscious willingness to be reborn every day. Empowerment means actively choosing and embracing life lived to its fullest through the spiritual dimension.

The essence of psychic healing is merely a speeding up in time what would normally take longer, possibly through the acceleration of chemical reactions. Ultimate reality, the ground state of our embodied reality, exists outside of spacetime.

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