

Quo Vadis Psilocybe?

William Harrison

Part II. Psilocybin mushrooms and religious experience: Let's start the adventure.

Hi there. The powers that be have moved this section up here, onto the web (closer to God?), so that just us activists can read this nuttier stuff – the sort of things that, either here or in Pakistan, might otherwise lead to angry letters to the editors, or terrorist bomb threats, et cetera. So, here we go:

One oft-heard statement, from Unitarian Universalists (UUs) ministers, is: *Believe as you wish, but this is what I believe.* And that includes, *about God.* Many UUs, while strong on Christian morality, Bible study, and Jesus' teachings, do not believe in that invisible, undetectable God. Many UUs see that as just a comforting idea that's only in the mind. As many as 30%, though, are various sorts of pantheists who believe that God is Nature, the Universe, or the Universe in combination with some guiding force. Thus, pantheist-flavored *veladas* might fit fairly well into UUism. If pushing positive behavior, though, what sort of a story to tell? How about, at least, some bits of this sort:

Introduction. Real *veladas* require that participants eat shrooms. Shrooms, though, are currently illegal, so tonight's *velada* must be done without them. For our introduction, though, let's pretend this is a real one . . . This *velada* will be a *story*, a *thanksgiving*, and an *unveiling*. As a *story*, it will be a science-rooted creation story – an updated *Genesis* that connects us, via creation, creator, and purpose, with all living beings. As a *thanksgiving*, it will be a reminder of gifts given, where from, and payback owed. As an *unveiling*, our shrooms become unveilers. With their help, you may see this world as more amazing than you've been treating it. If so, take that as an invite to know it better, to get involved with it more (via science, politics, education, art, religion, etc.), and help make it into something closer to that more amazing vision. With their help, you may see that life is more precious than you ever thought it was. If so, take that as an invite to protect lives better, especially where most needed – by our poor and homeless, by the victims of unjust laws and enforcement, by the victims of our ceaseless war, and by those of other species that we are most hurtfully impacting. Almost everything we humans do could be done better, fairer, and with less conflict – if only more would get involved and demand such. And that could be a shared goal – by all who'd care to share it. If today's *velada* gives you any good ideas as to how to make this world better, please do. Shrooms can expand imagination and inspire effort. Applying those to what you know as needs, injustices or wrongs, moves us closer to better living for all. **So let's start the adventure.** . . . *If shrooms were legal, this could be the time to partake – then, afterwards, continue the story. But they aren't, so we don't. Hopefully, though, they will someday be legal again – at least for religious use.*

Creation, Creator and God. Science tells us, with evidence, that the Universe and its larger parts (galaxies, hydrogen clouds, etc.), created its smaller ones (stars, planets, moons, life, etc.). Thus, the closest thing we have to a Creator God seems to be The Universe. Each of us, and all other living creatures, are living parts of Him . . . with each and every face a face of God. Those who see it that way are called pantheists. Assume The Universe is God, lean on what we know about our Universe, and out comes a plausible creation story: For millions of years, The Universe (God) was just a lifeless moving, cosmic system – a system of stars, planets and moons with

directions and motions predictable by God's laws (i.e. Newton's Laws of Motion). God likely had no brain, senses, or emotions. But then, back about 3.6 billion years ago, life appeared. Our Creator then became a living God – at least here on planet Earth. Ancestral lines grew, multiplied and, guided by natural selection, evolved. Over billions of years, some cell lines evolved a nucleus, acquired mitochondria, evolved sexual reproduction, and developed into multicellular creatures with rudimentary brains. Having brains, many evolved feelings and behaviors (e.g. loving, caring & nurturing) that favored progeny survival. With emotions came emotion-informed decision-making as to proper mates (sexual selection). Thus sexual selection, leaning on admired behaviors and physical traits, joined with natural selection, to guide evolution. More than 20,000 branches on nature's Tree of Life have evolved into vertebrate species (mammals, birds, and amphibians) that are loving, caring, nurturing and protective of their young. A Personal God is supposed to be an entity that watches over and protects. So aren't ancestor lines, which for millions of years have been loving, caring, and protective, very much like Personal Gods? And haven't most all of us been privileged to have been evolved by, birthed by, cared for, and raised by (those latter three, of course, mostly by our parents) our ancestor lines – our Personal Gods? And aren't all nature's butterflies and bees, and all our flowers, fungi, and trees, and those 20,000 species of mammals, birds and amphibians, evidence enough of a living, creator God who has acquired a really enormous number of very different faces?

Other consequences of God being The Universe: He becomes visible and knowable – no longer that invisible-undetectable, so often usurped for war and hate; with every face a face of God, all should be respected and treated well; every religion becomes a religion of God, every prophet a prophet of God, every person a son or daughter of God; everything that sustains us is either a living, or non-living, part of God. And He indeed is mighty – currently with 7.2 billion human brains and trillions of insect ones. And doesn't that tell us something about God's will, how to gauge it, and the chance that any one prophet knows it, etc.?

Payback Owed? Having been given so much by so many (parents, society, God, Mother Earth, ancestral lines, food

crops, food animals, etc.), we owe quite a bit of payback. Thoughtful guidance, as to what we owe to Mother Earth, crops and animals, is to be found in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. We never could have made it without the kindness and help of countless others, so much of our payback could be done by just being kind and helpful to others ... or by making things better, or doing our best at school or work -- anything that tends to benefit others, or both us and others. All sentient beings deserve our kindness – as all of them are our relatives. Each, like us, has been granted this miracle of life for just a short time – and most do seem to treasure it. Our indebtedness certainly applies to those killed for our food. Factory farms that maximize profit by torturous caging, exhaustive milking, and defeathering, in scalding water, are abominations that demand correction. Vital payback can be done by just maintaining our stewardship over clean air and water – and preventing, or cleaning up, our ongoing messes. Abominations like unneeded wars, our new Jim Crow, mountaintop removal, fracking, et cetera, much deserve the attention of God's brains and will. With a God having 7.3 billion brains, though, there is rarely consensus. But don't we see, at least, a hint of God's conscious will in giant flocks of birds in flight, in giant schools of fish and, with democracies, in majority votes on elections and propositions?

With shrooms, one's first-time setting seems to affect the respect later shown them. Where that's in a *velada* (like Gordon Wasson's or Andrew Weil's) or in some outside setting that becomes inspiring (Maria Sabina's or Paul Stamets'), later use tends towards reverently respectful. Where one's first-time involves sensualist partying (Tim Leary's) or as a diversion, just stumbled on, "in quest of firsthand observation into the phenomenology of the triptamine demention" (Terence McKenna's), later respect seems lots fainter. Thus, first-time, or even first-few-times, use might best be supervised spiritual – coupled with instruction as to who shouldn't, medications and drugs to avoid, and the many other "dos" and "don'ts" that apply (Addendum 2). With all that, subsequent use would likely be lots less problematic. Hopefully, laws could be crafted such that just two or three religious-use, with safety instruction, sessions, then passing an exam, would entitle one to a revocable permit card allowing purchase of shrooms from authorized dealers –

thus allowing legal use, at home or outdoors (religious or not), to all who've had instruction and passed that exam. And perhaps NAMA affiliates could offer that same sort of package – with additional instruction as to how best to identify shrooms so as not to end up poisoned. And all such topics would be of interest, to many, at Telluride Mushroom Festivals.

Addendum 1. If attending an unfamiliar religious event, just doing as others do is usually a fine and safe option. Such would have been rather more challenging, though, at that Marsh Chapel Experiment. The control group was given a fast-acting stimulant that, within a few minutes, wore off. The psilocybin group was given a slow-acting entheogen that produced (sequentially) yawning, euphoria, a focusing of attention, ever intensifying awe, and, after a couple of hours, profound mystical experiences. The experiences, being had by that psilocybin group, were seen as increasingly enviable. And that was felt, by the control group, as increasingly unfair – so they responded with quips, put-downs, jokes, making fun of, and various provoking and unruly behaviors (see Huston Smith). Their feelings of having been cheated, of that mystical experience, fueled all that. Few rules had been made, few rules were enforced, disorder ruled and decorum meant nothing. Those are lessons worth remembering for any who might wish to research, or develop, any new type *velada*.

Traditional *veladas* have rules, need rules, and all rules had best be known: (1) each person is assigned a mat and each is expected to stay on that mat, with no wandering about, and to signal for guides only when needed (for water, for being guided to and from the toilet, or for problems like serious fear or grief) (2) once the session has started, no talking is allowed and as little whispering as possible (3) the room is kept dark so faces are hard to see – that helps prevent giggle-fits (4) the *velada* is not about you, me, or any one person. It is about a diverse group and maintaining awe, majesty, magic and decorum (5) it is expected that all keep their hands to themselves and remember that *veladas* are neither pickup bars or necking spots (6) smiles are not come-ons, zippers must remain fully zipped, and cuddling-up, even between husband and wife, will get them separated – and perhaps thrown-out. All that pretty much applies, also, should one be invited to anyone's home, overseas, to share magic

mushrooms with the family. Some of us tourists have not done so well, in far off places, behavior wise. Maria Sabina came to regret ever having allowed foreigners (Gordon Wasson, etc.) as participants in her *veladas*. What followed, for her, was a flood of hippies – who ignored all local conventions as to acceptable, respectable behavior. Offended villagers burned down her house and she even lost faith in the magic of her shrooms. That's not to say that shrooms should be used only for religion. Those indigenous people, who regularly attend both church and *veladas*, have long been using them secularly *also* – with friends at pretty places (waterfalls, beaches, forests, etc.) or festivals, or just at home in bed for husband and wife love. To establish the claim that shrooms can legally be obtained for all responsible uses – but only by members who have had the instruction and passed the exam – that would need to be written up as church rules and requirements and negotiated with the DEA and FDA when, and if, the right to use gets granted in federal court. And such church rules might even someday inspire state and federal laws. But wherever used, shrooms are to be used responsibly and respectfully, for they are a most precious gift from God.

Addendum 2. Some people, in traveling abroad where psilocybin mushrooms are legal or tolerated, do encounter and sample them. Doing so can be lots safer, though, if they have done their homework and know what the dangers are. One excellent book that guides both identification and use is Stamets' *Psilocybin Mushrooms of the World*. For the most reliable and comprehensive website coverage of them, see www.erowid.org/plants/mushrooms/mushrooms.shtml. For some more up-to-date erowid postings on Dosage, Effects, Experiences, FAQ, etc., google: Erowid Psilocybin Mushrooms (Magic Mushrooms) Vault. See also "Magic Mushrooms and allowed use abroad" (Harrison, 2011, in FUNGI vol. 4 no. 3) and the web-posting at http://shroomswherelegal.com/Shrooms_Where_Legal_Advice_and_Warnings.html. The safety criteria, adhered to at Johns Hopkins, relative to who should and should not be allowed to take psilocybin, have been published in 2008 by Johnson et al. and can be seen at <http://www.csp.org/psilocybin/HopkinsHallucinogenSafety2008.pdf>. Presumably those same criteria might best be applied also to the use of psilocybin mushrooms. ↑