

**Peyote in the Pulpit**  
**What the Plant Spirits Have Taught Me about Preaching**  
By  
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There's an old Gnostic saying, "the only problem with Yahweh is he thinks he's God." In the Gnostic tradition, Yahweh is the antagonist in the story of Eden because he wants to prevent humanity from becoming independent and aware. The Serpent, on the other hand, is considered its hero because it wants people to open their eyes and see for themselves. As Elaine Pagels explains in her book on *The Gnostic Gospels*, "Here the serpent, long known to appear in gnostic literature as the principle of divine wisdom, convinces Adam and Eve to partake of knowledge while 'the Lord' threatens them with death, trying jealously to prevent them from attaining knowledge, and expelling them from Paradise when they achieve it."<sup>1</sup>

This seems to be the point of other ancient myths too, like when Zeus punishes Prometheus for giving fire, the light of the gods, to humanity, so they can see for themselves, so they no longer have to blindly obey the thunderous commands of the gods. In mythology, however, it is the serpent that's most often associated with illumination. The Hebrew word translated as *serpent* in Genesis, actually means, "shining one." It was not a serpent, but *nachash*, the Shining One, who approaches Eve and asks, "Did Yahweh really say you eat from the Tree of Knowledge?"

"He said we can eat from any tree but the Tree of Knowledge," Eve says, "We can't even touch it, he said, or it will kill us."

"Kill you! That's a laugh!" Shining One scoffs, "It most certainly will not kill you. Give it a try and *see* for yourself."

So, Eve tastes its delicious fruit then passes it to Adam and, as the story goes, "the eyes of both them were opened."

Of course, it wasn't all good. They had some bad trips too. For the Tree of Knowledge allowed them to see both "good and evil," but, at least, they could see it for themselves, with no further need to have the world interpreted for them by Fox News... I mean... Yahweh.

What fascinates me about this ancient account, which seems so obvious when I point it out but so few have ever noticed, is its claim humanity's original sin was ingesting a illegal, mind-altering, consciousness-expanding plant—the forbidden fruit Shining One promised would open our eyes. When Yahweh finds out about it, he calls Shining One a lowlife, kicks Eve and Adam out of the Garden where the mind-altering fruits grow, then assigns armed security guards to make sure they can't get back in. He then tells them they should be terrified of all Shining Ones and to stomp them dead in any future encounters. Yahweh does this, not to protect humanity, but so, as he says in the story, they "don't become like one of us," able to think for themselves.

When I consider the story in this light, today's international Drug War makes perfect sense. For what has become our nation's longest, costliest, deadliest, and most destructive war ever,

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<sup>1</sup> Pagels, Elaine, *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage Books, Random House Inc., New York, NY, 1979, 1989, p. xvii.

is about a few maintaining power over everyone else. According to the diary of H.R. Haldeman, President Nixon's Chief of Staff, during a meeting on April 28, 1969, "[Nixon] emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to."<sup>2</sup> Just six months later, the Controlled Substance Act was signed into law, allowing the Government to arrest, felonize, and politically disenfranchise the voters Nixon most feared, blacks, ostensibly for using heroine, and white youth for ostensibly smoking marijuana. To date, as I like to put it, U.S. taxpayers have spent over a trillion dollars and counting to pay for Nixon's unending reelection campaign.

But the Drug War was escalated under Ronald Reagan, who began pouring billions into it after his election in 1980, which is how the era of mass incarceration got started. As Michelle Alexander explains in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, "between 1980 and 2000, the number of people incarcerated in our nation's prisons and jails soared from roughly 300,000 to more than 2 million. By the end of 2007, more than 7 million Americans—or one in every 31 adults—were behind bars, on probation, or parole."<sup>3</sup> Half a million of them are in for drug related offences, compared to only about 40,000 in 1980,<sup>4</sup> about 80 percent of whom are in simply for marijuana possession.<sup>5</sup> "To put the matter in perspective," Alexander says, "there are more people in prisons or jails today just for drug offences than were incarcerated for *all* reasons in 1980."<sup>6</sup> The majority of these nonviolent drug related convicts are African American. "Nothing," Alexander says, "has contributed more to the systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States than the War on Drugs."<sup>7</sup> To grasp the political impact of all this, keep in mind that during the 2000 Presidential election in Florida the difference between the number of votes counted between Al Gore and George Bush were less than a percentage point, yet 4.6 percent of its voters, mostly minorities who would have voted for Gore, couldn't vote, mostly because they'd been convicted for nonviolent drug offenses.

Just as Yahweh uses weaponized guards—cherubim with fiery swords—to keep Eve and Adam from approaching the Tree of Life after they've gained the ability to determine the difference between right and wrong for themselves, the Drug War has led to the militarization of our local police departments and to a new way of preventing blacks, in particular, from approaching a better way of life; even after the Civil Rights Act, even after receiving the right to vote, the power, that is, to choose the difference between good and evil for themselves.

In addition to the grave injustices resulting from the racist Drug War, I'm troubled by its use as a form of mind control. Yahweh doesn't wish his subjects to see for themselves, thus forbidding them from eating of the Tree of Knowledge. Knowledge, is for authoritarians to dispense as they see fit, not for those governed to discover for themselves. Consider this, the

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Michelle, *The New Jim Crow*, The New Press, (Kindle Version) New York, NY, 2010, 2012, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

most dangerous illicit drugs, like cocaine, crank, speed, crystal meth, opium, OxyContin, Fentanyl, PCP and Methadone, are all Schedule II drugs, meaning, even though they have high risks of harm and addiction, the pharmaceutical industry can still use them. Yet naturally occurring, nonaddictive, low risk compounds, like psilocybin mushrooms, peyote, marijuana, and LSD, are Schedule I, meaning the medical and pharmaceutical industries, according to Federal law, aren't allowed to even conduct research with them.

What's often unknown about most these naturally occurring substances is the DMT molecule, N-dimethyltryptamine, that makes them psychoactive, is also endogenous within our own brains. In other words, we produce small amounts of DMT on our own. It may also surprise you to learn that certain chemical neurotransmitters in our brains, like serotonin, dopamine, and adrenaline, are shaped exactly like the molecular plant chemicals, psilocin, mescaline, and methamphetamine, found in peyote, magic mushrooms, and ayahuasca. As anthropologist Jeremy Narby writes, they are "like similar keys fitting the same lock."<sup>8</sup> Our brains share the same molecular design and chemical makeup as these now illegal plants because we have coevolved with them—we have grown up together—suggesting they were once so regular a part of our lives that they helped shape our neurology.

Nowadays, since the advent of the Drug War, these highly controlled substances are called hallucinogens, but when they were being experimented with in the 1960s they were considered consciousness expanders, which is probably more accurate. As Lynn Margulis and Dorian Sagan say in their book, *Micro-Cosmos*, "Our seniors on land, plants indeed seem very adept at seducing us animals, having tricked us into doing for them one of the few things we can do that they cannot: move."<sup>9</sup> In other words, plants borrow our central nervous systems to help them reproduce and conquer new domains, attracting us with rich colors, pleasing aromas, delicious flavors, and vital nutrients. As Darwin wrote in *Origin of Species*, "there could have been no flower before there was an eye to see it."<sup>10</sup> For the secret to their success is getting our attention, which is why fruits and flowers explode with color when they're ripe and ready to be eaten by the birds and the bees, and the bears and by us, to help carry their seed with us wherever we go. Just as we have all heard carrots are good for our eyes, some plants have even evolved to make us more aware of our environments so we can better find them for ourselves. In short, they have evolved to make us smarter. This is why we produce endogenous amounts of DMT, and why we have molecular keyholes in our heads the DMT plants can unlock, to open our minds and expand our consciousness.

In places around the world where these naturally occurring compounds remain a part of human life and ritual, like in the Peruvian Amazon, they are called, the Plant Teachers, or Plant Spirits, that work through the shamans who ingest them to bring wisdom to the community and healing to the sick. It is the shaman's job to prepare and drink the ayahuasca

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<sup>8</sup> Narby, Jeremy, *The Cosmic Serpent*, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 1998, p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Margulis, Lynn, & Sagan, Dorian, *Micro-Cosmos*, Summit Books, a Division of Simon and Schuster, New York, NY, 1986, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Sheldrake, Rupert & Fox, Matthew, *Natural Grace*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1996, p. 59.

tea, enter the spirit world, then to return to the community to share what she or he has learned from the Plant Teachers.

I first became interested in this subject about 13 years ago, for reasons we don't have time to go into, but, in short, a series of coincidental, or synchronistic, events led me to drink ayahuasca under the guidance of a Huichol shaman. Although it remains the most profound experience of my life, I've not been compelled to do so again; not to say I won't, but, to this day, I'm still unraveling all I learned and gained from this single encounter with the Plant Teachers. I do know that it has shaped my understanding of ministry as a form of shamanism, and helped me see myself as a shaman.

But before I say more about this, let me talk just a little about what I believe about the nature of the visions experienced while under the influence of psychotropic compounds, or, more respectfully, under the guidance of the Plant Teachers. Based upon both my research and limited personal experience in this area, I consider the visions real, by which I mean they are empirically present and physically seen. This doesn't mean I believe, for example, the snake I saw protruding from the Huichol shaman's third eye was really there, or that the geometric shapes on his clothing really started floating about midair as he chanted his icaru songs, or that he actually disappeared when I saw nothing but space between his poncho and sombrero. What it means is that, as far as I could tell, I was completely aware of what was happening around me, more aware than I'd ever been. I wasn't hallucinating in the sense I was seeing things not there, but was seeing the things that were there in a different way.

And I use the term *seeing* because, it turns out, these compounds actually stimulate the optic nerves. The visionary experiences under their influence are genuinely visual experiences. If I ask you to close your eyes and imagine a snake, it's easy. But asking you to open your eyes and see a snake that's not there is nearly impossible. I once heard someone describe these experiences as dreaming while one is awake, which may be accurate. For one is quite aware of the environment one is in and of all that's going on, yet there are many oddities present that aren't usually perceptible.

The reason I think these oddities are empirically present is because I believe they are symbolic representations of microscopic, molecular, even quantum realities our usual senses are incapable of perceiving. Just as psychology considers dream images to be symbols of unconscious realities, I'm suggesting DMT induced images are symbolic representations of realities our brains don't have the neuropathways for fully imagining, so they compensate with familiar images we can recognize. Thus, instead of DNA, we see entwined snakes. It was anthropologist Jeremy Narby who first discovered this possibility while looking at a collection of paintings by shaman, Pablo Amaringo, and was stunned to notice double helixes in one of them. A few weeks later he showed it to a microbiologist who responded in the same way, "Look, there's collagen... And there, that's the axon's embryonic network with its neurites... Those are triple helixes... And that's DNA from afar, looking like a telephone cord... This looks like chromosomes at a specific phase... There's the spread-out form of DNA, and right next to it are DNA spools in their nucleosome structure."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Narby, *ibid.*, p. 69f.

In my own experience, like *Alice in Wonderland*, who immediately shrinks upon drinking a potion, shortly after drinking ayahuasca I observed everything around me vibrate apart until I was but a particle floating in a sea of particles. In my case, I saw both snakes and strands of DNA floating by, or, at least, DNA as it is depicted in science books. This only lasted seconds before it all reassembled and I was back in macroscopic reality, now inhabited by a few oddities, to say the least.

This ability to see the world on a microscopic or molecular level helps explain how ayahuasqueros, Peruvian shamans, are able to correctly diagnose and treat the sick, which is why, as Jeremy Narby explains, “Pharmaceutical companies have a history of going to the Amazon to sample indigenous plant remedies and then returning to their laboratories to synthesize and patent the active ingredients without leaving anything for those who made the original discovery.”<sup>12</sup> Narby also points out that, “74 percent of the modern pharmacopoeia’s plant-based remedies were first discovered by ‘traditional’ societies,”<sup>13</sup> an impressive accomplishment for people who are only supposed to be hallucinating.

So that’s all the theory I’ll go into about how I think these psychoactive compounds work. The other thing I would say is that I’ve only had the one experience with ayahuasca, and only then within a ritualized setting and with great reverence for the religious nature of my intentions. I have great respect for these compounds and would never use them casually or recreationally. If it were not for what I took as a direct request from the Plant Teachers themselves, whom I felt reached out to me, opened their door, and invited me in, I would never have partaken at all. Since they’ve not invited me back, I’ve not participated again. The truth is, I have the same reverence for marijuana, which I also don’t smoke.

I’d love for the Plant Teachers to invite me back again, because I’d like to explore their unusual world again, but even during the one trip, they were reluctant to let me dwell on its wonders. My task, at the time, was to remain humble and purge myself of all the nonsense in my life. So I spent most the night tossing my cookies into the green bucket I brought for that purpose. Everything outside the bucket was a wonderland, but the bucket before me was completely normal, and whenever I even peaked beyond its rim, the Plant Teachers indicated I wasn’t supposed to dwell on the spectacle and needed to get back to work, prostrate before the cheap plastic Easter pale I’d picked up at a *Walgreens* on my way to the retreat location.

Perhaps they’ve not invited me back for the same reason, because my work is still in the bucket, in this reality, purging myself of false perceptions and paradigms, and, as a shaman, helping others do the same. For those familiar with my sermons, you may have noticed I see the world a little differently than most. And I mean, just a *little* differently. For I see the same world as everyone else, only with a few oddities in it I’m always happy to point out, that I feel are my responsibility to point out. Recall just a handful of the sermons I’ve given this year alone and you’ll understand what I mean. Remember, *Pale Blue Dot*, showing that we are an infinitesimally tiny part of the immense Universe? Talk about helping others experience

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<sup>12</sup> Narby, *ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

reality on a molecular level. Or how about *Swallowing the Blue Pill*, about our need, especially as a society, to base our beliefs on empirical reality and not just our unconscious whims. That was my version of saying, get back to the bucket, do the work, purge yourselves of false paradigms. Then there was my sermon, *Happy's Good Friday*, in which I repeatedly called the Bible, the *Binder*, a subtle shift helping you to view its reality from an altered-state of consciousness. In *Look Both Ways before Crossing the Street*, I offered a method for viewing the world in an altered state of consciousness, by questioning our own paradigms and always trying to see things from different perspectives. I did the same thing a couple weeks ago in my sermon, *Being Thoughtful*, in which I challenged the common mind/heart duality by suggesting thoughts and feelings are one event that need to go together. And just a few weeks ago I gave a sermon entitled, *The Naked Emperor*, during which I named several false paradigms, several of the ways, that is, our society deludes itself with lies, like global warming is a hoax and part of natural cycle; or that we are in a post-racial society and things have gotten much better since the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964; or that there has ever been such a thing as "the good old days;" or that Obamacare is a disaster; or protecting the environment costs jobs; or the government is the problem; or that pro-life advocates value the sanctity of life; or that ours is a Christian nation.

You see, as a shaman, my task isn't to talk about hallucinations and delusions, but about the world we're in, and to help other see it with an expanded consciousness. Each time I get up to the pulpit, my intention is to put you in an altered state of mind, to have you walk out saying, I never thought about it like that before. Only instead of passing out peyote, I spend my time delving into philosophy, and psychology, and science, and other disciplines, then bringing back what I've discovered to share with my community.

But none of this has really been about me or my preaching style. It's about you, and your power to be your own shaman by going deeper for yourself, by purging yourself of your own paradigms, and learning to see the oddities in the world that so few are willing to look at, let alone speak about. I'm talking about having the courage to provoke the wrath of the gods by following the serpent's wisdom, eating the forbidden fruit, considering forbidden ideas, speaking about forbidden beliefs, and deciding the difference between which are right and wrong for yourself.

So many seek experiences that might help them transcend this world, but, just as the shaman chants icaru songs to help keep journeyers tethered to this world, so they don't get lost and can find their way back from the realm of the Plant Teachers, our work is here, in this realm, inside the rim of the bucket, inside the whole hoop of the world.