

Remembering Terence McKenna

By Howard Rheingold

Sometime in the late 1970s, I came across a series of audiotapes that told an amazing and hard to believe story of ethnobotanical and psychedelic adventuring. It was called True Hallucinations, now a book and a video. The voice of the storyteller, Terence McKenna, was mesmerizing. Psychedelics had been a formative influence on my life -- I was 16 when I first ate peyote, on November 22, 1963 (and that's another story indeed). In large part because of my experiences, I've been open-minded and agnostic -- I don't know much about what is happening in the universe, but I know it is mysterious and much larger, stranger, and conscious than words can convey. I'm not a true believer in any God, UFO, or extrasensory experience, but neither am I convinced that none of these things exist. I continued to follow McKenna's adventures.

In the late 1980s, I went to a lecture by Terence in San Francisco. I approached him afterward, queuing up with the other acolytes. I told him that I wanted to interview him, a request he greeted with a kind of world-weary forebearance -- until I told him that I could get an assignment from Whole Earth Review. He replied that if WER would send me to his ethnobotanical preserve on the Big Island of Hawaii, he'd grant me the interview. So I found myself on a plane. I fantasized that he would tank me up on exotic botanical mind expanders, then at the peak of the trip would rip off his face to reveal that he was, as some suspected, an extraterrestrial.

He picked me up in a sturdy Jeep that had seen a lot of action. We drove away from the airport and up a bleak, black, volcanic cinder landscape. When we bounced along on the volcanic rock, he told me that the Jeep was named "Sugaree," which makes immediate sense to Deadheads ("Shake it, Shake It, Sugaree..."). Then we left the volcanic rock and entered the jungle. The moment we were surrounded by vegetation, Terence pulled out, lit, and passed to me an enormous spliff. I've seen some prodigious dedication to cannabis in my time, but anyone who knew Terence would back me up: he was the king of wake and bake potheads. As he exhaled, he recited some words in Italian. I don't know much Italian but I did know what they meant, for they were the first sentence of Dante's Divine Comedy: "Midway in life's journey, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from

the straight path." Then Terence laughed maniacally. I can smile now, but I felt like I was headed into some kind of interdimensional trial by fire -- that I had signed up for. So many adventures seem attractive when you are only planning them.

Yes, Terence was a stoner -- in a book about cannabis and spirituality, his wife, Kat Harrison McKenna (accomplished ethnobotanist in her own right), wrote that she and cannabis were "sister-wives" to Terence. If your internal image of someone who smokes strong pot all day long is of befogged Sean Penn in "Fast Times at Ridgement High," you are getting the wrong picture. When we arrived his "secret rebel stronghold," we went immediately to the kitchen where an enormous caldron of brown liquid with an alien pungency was bubbling. As he toked and stirred, McKenna talked with scholarly authority about the history of alchemy, the quantum mechanics of consciousness, North African cave paintings, virtual reality and mind expansion, Descartes' lucid dream, computer bulletin board systems and the Rosicrucian furor of 17th century Paris. He was the most comprehensive and well-read thinker I've ever known. He was, above all, a bard...and although it was sometimes difficult to separate the story-telling from the verifiable reality of some of his tales, he knew what he was talking about. He was a well-informed bard, a scholar and scientist (who once made his living as an exotic butterfly collector).

The brown stuff we stirred for hours was, of course, Ayahuasca. These days, you can participate in Ayahuasca rituals in Williamsburg or Berkeley, or take an organized trip to Peru. In 1989, it wasn't so easy to come by. Part of the mystique of the plant is the mystery of the provenance of its ethnobotanical-psychoactive usage. Ayahuasca itself is a woody vine -- we were boiling the pulp of its bark. *Banisteriopsis caapi* can grow up trees in DNA-like helices. The vine contains tryptamines that induce powerful psychedelic effects when it is smoked in the form of DMT -- dimethyl tryptamine. But tryptamines don't work when you eat them -- the digested chemical requires the addition of a specific kind of other psychoactive chemical, a monamine oxide inhibitor. However, if you combine the boiled bark with the leaf of a completely unrelated shrub, *Psychotria viridis*, which contains an MAO inhibitor, *Banisteriopsis* soup becomes Ayahuasca, also known as Yage or The Ladder to the Stars. The brew has been used by many unrelated tribes spread out across the Amazon. No one really knows how long this has been going on.

The mystery of Ayahuasca is how this mind-manifesting plant partnership was discovered -- there are more than 80,000 plant species in the Amazon, which

means an intractably large number of possible combinations. How did the first Ayahuasqueros know to combine the leaves of *P. viridis* with the boiled bark of *B. caapi*? The shamans from many unrelated cultures claim that the plants told them. You just need to know how to listen. Which brings me to my agnosticism. To a modern, twentieth century firm believer in rationalism and science, the notion that plants will tell you how to use them is crosses the outer boundaries of credibility. However, a few nagging questions remains: How *did* they know? Who knows more about plants than the plant medicine specialist for a tribe that has inhabited the jungle for thousands of years? Scientists used to be believed that trees weren't social, now we know that trees communicate and cooperate. There's the empirical if not strictly scientific method of the shaman, whose role in their tribes included learning which plants were edible, which plants were dangerous, which plants were useful. Using themselves as their experimental subjects, shamans experimented and passed their knowledge along -- for thousands of years in the Americas, and tens of thousands of years before that in Siberia -- building an orally transmitted body of knowledge.

Due to the work of Richard Evans Schultes and his students, the colonial era popular image of indigenous people as "primitive" because of their sparse physical technology changed to a picture of people whose external lives are far simpler than that of a modern city dweller, but whose psychospiritual lives are complex and have evolved through generations of direct experience with dimensions other than everyday consensus reality.

One of those inspired by Schultes was Michael Harner, at one time the chair of the anthropology department at The New School. I encountered Harner when I was staff writer for Institute of Noetic Sciences -- yet another story -- and subsequently read his edited volume, Hallucinogens and Shamanism. Harner told one of those stories that challenge the boundaries of credibility. He was fed Ayahuasca by a remote tribe in the Amazon, who took him out into the jungle and left him there. Harner recounts that there was indeed a ladder to the stars, and as he climbed it, he was stopped at some point far beyond earth by entities who claimed that they were "the guardians of the outer darkness" and forbade him from travelling further. Somehow, Harner managed to find his way back to the tribal village. When he told them about the "guardians of outer darkness," the villagers howled with laughter. When he asked them what was funny, they replied: "they tell everybody that."

Terence's ethnobotanical preserve had a porch that faced the garden and the jungle beyond that. B. Caapi vines climbed the native trees, forming helical trunks as big around as a human thigh. Toward sundown, Terence set me up on the porch. I wore a shift with nothing underneath it. He gave me a pad to lie down on and a bucket. Then he urged me like a workout coach to continue to force myself to swallow the spicy dirt juice he had boiled down for hours. I figured he was going to sit with me, but he said goodnight: "If you get in trouble, sing."

An hour passed. It was dark. The sky was clear and thick with stars. The shadows of the vine-covered trees were black silhouettes against the star field. You didn't have to take a psychoactive drug to realize, in places like that, that we are all sucked up against a planet hurtling through space. I laid there, queasy.

Terence was somewhere in the house. I was on the porch, queasy, lying on a pad, wearing a shift. I knew what the bucket was for. The battle was to keep the brew in my stomach long enough to absorb the psychoactive ingredients; projectile vomiting was inevitable. That wasn't all. When I couldn't hold it any longer and started spewing from my head end, my tail end erupted simultaneously with projectile diarrhea. That's what the shift was for. Okay. I was definitely disoriented. Something was happening to my head in a big way, but my physical body was a mess. I got a lot in the bucket, but I also missed. The outdoor shower was downstairs. I carried the bucket. I emptied it in the shower drain, turned on the water, and stepped under the shower. I noted that in the mixture of bodily expulsions that I was attempting to wash down the drain, there seemed to be myriad wiggly glowing worms. Aha. One of the benefits of Ayahuasca is that it kills parasites -- handy for jungle dwellers. The little worms resisted the water that was flowing them down the grate. I was standing there, holding my soaked shift up with my hands, a flashlight in my mouth. The willies truly started to set in when the glowing worms not only resisted the flow of the water, but started swimming up the light beam of the flashlight.

I washed off my shift and my body and the bucket, refilled the bucket, climbed back up the stairs, washed off the deck, and laid back down. The last thing I saw before I closed my eyes was the black silhouette cut out of the milky way, the shadow of *Banisteriopsis*-supporting trees surrounding the clearing that faced the deck I was lying on. They looked like giant vegetable transmitting towers.

When I closed my eyes, I saw what seemed like a clay-like, moldable substance, the color of caramel taffy. Looking closer, I could see something inscribed on it in a writhing script that disappeared to be replaced by more script, all in a symbol system I didn't recognize or understand. It reminded me of the time when I was in the middle of a book project and semi-woke in the middle of the night. Before I realized that I had been dreaming, I saw screensful of words. I couldn't read them, but I knew they were my words. Some unseen hand was selecting, moving, deleting, replacing blocks of text. I only caught about a second and a half, but it was like I had caught my subconscious doing what it usually does -- except its activities are usually hidden.

I was familiar with The Fear and knew about breathing and turning off my mind and relaxing and floating downstream. It seemed like ego death had happened an indetermined amount of time in the past, but the sense of being thrashed around indiscriminately by something far larger than me became overwhelming. Terence told me to sing if I encountered turbulence. I reached for my voice. It wasn't there. It's like when you partially reawaken from sleep and can't move and try to scream but can only emit a puny whisper. I couldn't think of what to sing. So I croaked "help!" for an indeterminate period. My voice got stronger and that seemed to help. But "help" seemed too pathetic. It turned to "help me!" and eventually to "help me understand" and then the inchoate audio-visual-psycho-spiritual maelstrom snapped into focus. Those plants literally ARE vegetable transmitters, and I am being beamed instructions. That I didn't understand the language the instructions were beaming in didn't seem to matter. I can't remember anything else of that night.

When I got up in the morning, Terence was fixing breakfast. "Your singing was strong," he said. It wasn't until years later that it finally sank in that he had been able to hear me and heard me croaking out "help" and "help me" for an indeterminate time without doing anything.

I'm standing in the kitchen of his ethnobotanical preserve in Hawaii, watching Terence get another batch of Ayahuasca ready to brew.

"Why don't you get your friend at Whole Earth to help do something about the plants?"

I knew what he was talking about -- it was why he had an ethnobotanical preserve, and occupied a lot of our conversation as he showed me around

the grounds the day before the night of my Ayahuasca experience. When he showed a plant, he talked about its pharmaceutical use (not all the plants were psychoactive -- many were medicinal)...and the threats to its environment and the people who know the most about how to use it. And the moment he said that, he it was as if he had held up a large lens and tuned my inchoate visions of the night before into a tight focus: "We have helped you. Now we need your help." was what the giant vegetable transmitter I saw outlined against the stars was transmitting into my brain. I have no objective way to prove or even show how Terence's question snapped the incomprehensible into a simple message. I just knew.

This kind of knowing that is so deeply felt that it is also a way of being, was labeled "noetic" by William James. Edgar Mitchell, one of the Apollo astronauts, had a psychedelic experience when doing an extravehicular activity. He was so profoundly moved that he retired and founded the Institute of Noetic Sciences. I was their staff writer in the early 1980s. Mitchell told me a story about an air show in London that was being attended by a Soviet cosmonaut. The press thought it would be a good idea to put them both into the twin seats in the cockpit of a jet fighter. When they were seated and nobody else could hear them, Mitchell said that the first thing the cosmonaut said to him was "did you see God up there, too?"

I was attracted to the Institute of Noetic Sciences because of my interest in pursuing research about consciousness, and because the Director, Willis Harman, had written a book that influenced me, *An Incomplete Guide to the future*. Harman had been a professor of electrical engineering at Stanford in the 1950s, until one of his friends from his small home town, the legendary Al Hubbard, showed up with an experimental drug he said he had obtained from the CIA: LSD. Willis, by his account, said he ascended to the ceiling, where he observed his body on the couch. I've never known anyone as convinced as Willis that he was not his body. I ended up co-authoring with Willis our 1984 book, *Higher Creativity: Liberating the Unconscious for Breakthrough Insights*.

"Would you be interested in co-editing an issue of *Whole Earth Review*?" was my reply to Terence's question."

"Definitely."

I proposed the idea to Kevin Kelly, who instantly supported it. Terence and I decided to include material about plants as teachers and material about the impending loss of plant habitat and knowledge about plant uses. In practical terms, Terence connected me with his friend Rob Montgomery. Rob had a small farm where he propagated and sold (legally) plants of ethnobotanical interest. I had a greenhouse. *Banisteriopsis* turned out to not like Northern California winters in an unheated greenhouse. But I was intrigued by Rob's operation. He went on expeditions to the Amazon and elsewhere, collected seeds and cuttings, and went through the paperwork necessary to legally export them. Then he propagated them on his farm and sold plant starts through his catalog. He also had a growing network of other farmers and other explorers -- the fieldworkers would export endangered plants and the farmers would propagate and distribute them. We started the Botanical Preservation Corps to network the fieldworkers and the growers. Over twenty years later, a version still exists.

Ours was the Fall, 1989 edition. WER went out of business in 1995. Someone I don't know bought the compilation rights and is selling a digital version online for a couple bucks. Someone else I don't know put a scan of one of my articles, *Ethnobotany: the Search for Vanishing Knowledge*, online. Maybe there are other articles online.

Not long after our co-edited magazine was published, the editor of Whole Earth Review, Kevin Kelly, asked me if I would guest-edit the quarterly magazine for a year, while he worked on a book. Kevin never returned and I ended up spending 4 years at the ramshackle office in Sausalito, one of the most satisfying enterprises of my life in publishing. I figured that I had been recruited by the plants, drafted into service, so when we put together the *Millennium Whole Earth Catalog* in 1994 (again, now available from someone I don't know), I insisted on reserving four two-page spreads for plant teachers. This was the cause of much conflict. The great genius of the original Whole Earth catalog, was that Stewart Brand found people who were not only experts in disparate fields -- from land use to childbirth to alternative energy technology -- but the centers of their own networks. Brand was what Fred Turner calls a "network entrepreneur." Each section editor puts out a call and receives an incoming flood of suggestions. The editor selects the best, within her own rubric for the catalog or the magazine issue. Then the executive editor balances the different streams

of information from the disparate communities, and puts together the final mix. The ecosystems people and the community people and the energy people were always on my case about wanting one or two of the four spreads I had extravagantly allocated to plant teachers. But I stood my ground.

One more remembrance -- the night I followed Terence's directions and got a good whupping from a plant teacher. I stayed away from all psychedelics for more than twenty years.

I didn't return to the secret rebel ethnobotanical base in Hawaii, but I spent some time with Terence in Occidental, about an hour's drive north from me, and he spent some time at my place. He introduced me to a fellow who sold me plants of (legal) ethnobotanical interest, which I attempted to keep alive in my greenhouse. One time when Terence and I were talking in the greenhouse, we were joined by Jaron Lanier. They had not met before. I had to go pick up my daughter, so I left them. It wasn't until I returned about an hour later that I discovered that I had reflexively locked them in.

Terence strongly recommended taking a "heroic" dose of mushrooms -- about five grams of dried shrooms would do it. He also recommended -- insisted was more like it -- that I do it alone, in the dark. The alone part suited Judy, who doesn't want to be around me when my mind is that enlarged, who agreed that I could do it outside on our back deck -- decks turned out to be a leitmotiv of these adventures -- at night. With the door locked from the inside. So I set myself up with a pad and a bucket, just in case, although shrooms tend sometimes toward mild nausea and not toward Ayahuasca's projectile proclivities.

I also brought a cassette tape player -- remember, this was around 1990 -- and a set of tapes I had acquired. Maria Sabina, a towering spiritual figure of the twentieth century, the humble healer in the mountains above Oaxaca who introduced mushrooms to the Western world, had allowed Gordon Wasson, who had first discovered her, to record one of her mushroom veladas -- a ritual to help someone in physical and/or spiritual distress. Maria Sabina was involved, since she was a little girl, in seeking healing help from other dimensions.

Around 10 PM I ate the shrooms, lay down on the pad on my deck, turned on the cassette player, added a blindfold to keep me completely in the dark.

Maria Sabina started chanting. I didn't know what she was saying, but her fervor and fearlessness came through. It was like she was flycasting, throwing out her prayer, pulling it in, throwing it out again. It went on like that for a long time. Then it seemed like she got a nibble -- no, it was a bite, and a big one. Something had grabbed ahold of her chant and she was struggling to reel it in. I've experienced what William Burroughs calls "the fear," and I know to breathe until it passes, but this feeling surpassed the normal willies. The hairs on the back of my mind were standing straight up. I took off the earphones. I was definitely fully in the soup and the soup was definitely in me. I reached for the package that had contained the set of cassette tapes and read about this Velada. Why I had not read all the captions before I embarked, I don't know. But the point is that the healer was unable to heal -- the big something she reeled in told her that the patient was going to die.

I retreated to my pad and a mildly vibrating case of "oh fuck!" Although I was aware that I was experiencing the effects of a drug and that it would wear off, the big skeery feeling just wouldn't go away. So I decided to pray. I wasn't sure who to pray to, so I just chanted "I pray to ALL the holy names!" over and over. That definitely helped calm the noetic waters, but then I stopped to take a sip of water. At that moment, I swear I heard gunfire in the distance. So I started chanting again. I paused again, and the sound of screeching brakes followed by the sound of breaking glass came from the direction of the highway. Chanted again, paused: Somebody started yelling at somebody a block away. I felt like the person in the H.P. Lovecraft who unwittingly unlocks the prison where ancient awful gods had been stashed before the beginning of time. Or the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. There were big entities out there beyond the stairway to the stars, and not all of them were friendly disposed to earthling minds. Tonight, I had chosen to be the one to chant them away until daylight, and so I did. In the morning, I felt like a Sunday sailor who had taken my small boat out onto the bay and ran into an unpredicted hurricane, praying that if I only got back to land I would never go out there again without someone who knows what they are doing.

And that was my psychedelic graduation, after a couple decades of intermittent experimentation: I felt that I had traveled as best as I could on my own and needed someone who not only knew how to navigate but

knew where to go. I never did get -- so far -- to a part of the world where such a person could be found.

As I wrote [in my Patreon](#), "To a significant extent, my life path and my ways of thinking were permanently altered by my experimentation with psychedelics in my teens and twenties. In my sixties, the most important takeaway was that the revelations that had shaped my ways of thinking and living still seemed valid. Among these were the understanding that the universe (as JBS Haldane put it) is not only stranger than I imagine, but stranger than I can imagine (which makes me an agnostic on matters such as God and extrasensory experience); the direct experience of the way mind and culture construct reality -- and the infinite number of other ways it can be constructed (as William James put it: "Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different; the possibility that consciousness, like energy and matter, is fundamental (that is, just as life seems to vivify matter and consciousness seems to add another dimension to sentient life, psychedelic experience put me in touch with a way of experiencing consciousness that seemed to be extending this teleology -- and which implied that there are even more extended forms of consciousness, perhaps to come, perhaps coextant with the world we know but not perceptible to the unawakened mind; direct experience of the interbeing of all things. "

A few years ago, a quarter century after the mushroom teacher took me by the scruff of my soul and shook me the way a terrier shakes a captured critter, I took LSD a couple of times to see what it was like to go out there as an aging cancer survivor. I was a little afraid of going to dark places -- I had survived cancer, I was closer to death, etc -- but I realized that I had not taken into account two things. First, the present can expand a great deal, which causes the remembered past as the imagined future to shrink; second, I had better coping mechanisms in my sixties than I did in my teens and even my forties.

