

TO: FDA staff reviewing MAPS' MDMA/PTSD Therapist Training Protocol
FROM: Daniel A. Helminiak, PhD, PhD, LPC, Professor of Psychology, U. of West Georgia
DATE: April 10, 2009

Sent to Rick Doblin, Ph.D., for inclusion in the protocol submission

Dear FDA Reviewers,

I'm currently a priest, psychotherapist, and Professor of Psychology. In the early 1970s, I legally received LSD within an FDA-approved "Training Project for Mental Health Professionals" conducted by William Richards, Ph.D., and colleagues at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in Baltimore. I believe my patients and parishioners have benefited substantially from what I learned in my two LSD experiences in that training program, as I will explain below. I'm writing now in support of your approval of the MAPS protocol seeking permission to administer one MDMA session as part of a training program for therapists who may work in MAPS-sponsored MDMA/PTSD studies.

As a Roman Catholic priest and junior faculty member at Saint Mary Seminary and University, Baltimore, MD, 1972-1973, I learned of that research project on LSD when William A. Richards, Ph.D. presented a class at the seminary. It addressed the effects of psychedelic drugs and was intended to offer seminary students some understanding of what mystical experience might be like. Interested in the topic, I attended the lecture and then volunteered to be a subject in the research program geared to mental health professionals. As a priest and prospective professor of theology, I qualified.

Under the supervision of Bill Richards, I had two LSD experiences, one with 300 µg LSD by ingestion on March 6, 1973, and a second, again by ingestion (I have no record of the dosage) on May 23, 1974. I was reclining on a couch in a living-room like counseling room, blindfolded once the drug took effect, and wearing earphones that played excerpts of classical music. The sessions continued for eight to twelve hours.

Looking back over 35 years, I continue to see that LSD experience as a major, positive event that enhanced my abilities as a priest, therapist, and educator. The experience has had effects of which I am well aware and others, I suspect, that I do not realize. I have no sense that the experience had any negative results.

I had been interested in spirituality since my youth, and I have dedicated my life to its study. Having completed PhDs in both systematic theology (1979) and human development (1994), I have developed a psychology of spirituality that is integrated into a comprehensive interdisciplinary perspective. The LSD experience was seminal in this achievement. The drug-induced experience suggested to me that much of what is said about mysticism as an immediate experience of God needs to be rethought in light of contemporary psychology and neuroscience. I remain a confirmed theist and practicing Catholic, but I have refined my understanding of God to allow that humans might have transcendent experiences—as I did in those LSD sessions—

without necessarily having experienced God in any exclusive or unique sense: if the ingestion of chemicals can precipitate the experiences I had, it makes no sense to say that such experiences are extraordinarily of God. Thus, my Spring Grove experience played a major role in opening a field of research that became my life's work and, I at least believe, a major and, thus far, virtually unique contribution to the psychology of religion.

In addition to letting me experience and clearly recognize what I have called the spiritual dimension of the human mind, the LSD sessions also revealed to me other aspects of the mind. These further revelations enhanced my understanding and practice of psychology and psychotherapy in far reaching ways. Through the LSD experience, I not only gained an understanding of the mind, but also had an actual, vivid experience of its operations. I recognized imagery as the powerful language of the mind and emotions as its unmasked expression. As a result, I highly value non-conceptual matters—poetry, music, symbols, myth—despite my controlling scientific bent and extremely sophisticated conceptual abilities (enhanced by my study at Boston College with Prof. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, said to be one of the geniuses of the 20th Century, worthy of ranking among figures such as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, and Georg W. F. Hegel). I also recognized in my experience a process of what I call "layering" in which, it seems, the mind moves toward healthy integration and harmony by working ever more deeply through psychodynamic material in an orderly sequence, one issue at a time. I also realized that this process is guided by an intelligence more knowing than the deliberate and planned decisions of the conscious mind: there is a wisdom in the human make-up of which conscious awareness and articulated insight are but a small expression. So, experientially, I learned that the human mind can be trusted; it is geared to health, growth, expansion. What it needs most is to be given space to unfold as it is wont.

The LSD sessions effected that learning by facilitating the resolution of my own psychological issues. The sessions allowed me to break through the highly rationalized and often excessively intellectual style I had adopted. They enhanced my ability to experience my emotions. The sessions also furthered my awareness of my body and advanced my acceptance of myself as a biological organism.

As a celibate Roman Catholic priest, for example, I had inklings of the fact that I was, in part, using the priesthood as a hollowed way to avoid my sexuality; but only after the LSD therapy (the term *therapy* seems appropriate) was I able to embrace my sexuality and then deal with it in a wholesome and life-enhancing way. I now teach Human Sexuality, one of the most popular and, I am told, most influential undergraduate courses offered on my campus. In the correlative matter of sex and drug abuse, mention of my Spring Grove experience gives my professorial statements a credibility and power that students respect. I firmly believe that without the psychedelic experience I could have gone on running from myself and, thus, wasting much of my potential for years, decades, perhaps a lifetime. It is significant, for example, that I had done no professional publication until after those LSD sessions. I remember myself as *timid*, overly deferential, and insecure in my own opinions during my early years as a parish priest. Later I became a powerhouse of professional productivity and secure self-confidence. I have published nine books and scores of professional and popular articles.

Of course, the LSD sessions occurred during the early years of my theological doctoral studies, and these—especially with the influence of Bernard Lonergan, which helped me

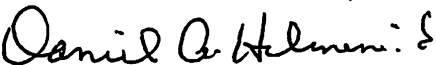
understand and trust my intelligence, put it in the context of my whole person, and not fear my mind's incessant activity—undoubtedly also allowed me to become professionally productive. Obviously, it is impossible to sort out the causality in this case. Still, my sense is that I could not have achieved what I have in my life if I had not been freed from deep-seated internal conflicts through the LSD sessions. I have the sense that their integrative effect on me would have required ten or fifteen years of standard psychotherapy or would even, perhaps, never have resulted at all, and today I might well be an up-tight bishop, comfortable telling other people how to run their lives. I recall that, since 1973, I could count on one hand the attacks of colitis I experienced—a psychosomatic symptom of stress and anxiety—whereas earlier, colitis was a regular aspect of my life.

I have been recounting lessons I learned about the human mind by learning about myself through the experience of LSD-induced altered states of consciousness. I also need to note how this learning flowed over into my psychotherapeutic practice, my preaching, my teaching, and all my interpersonal interactions. I have a wonderful ability to shift back and forth from an intellectual focus to a psychotherapeutic one, to one based on sensitivity to emotions, moods, intuitions, and personal states rather than on ideas, thoughts, cognitions, and values. Moreover, I have not only an understanding, but also a "feel" for how these facets of one's being work together. Thus, this inveterate intellectual is able to sit with clients and other people in profound empathy, sensitivity, and compassion and with uncanny insight and to create a space in which others can safely be and express themselves. I know firsthand the hard healing process of internal struggle, shifting, avoidance, and eventual integration, and I have no fear of its threats. I can be an agent for important personal transformation for other people. At least in my own mind, I attribute this achievement in large part to my LSD experiences. I believe that therapists who will be conducting studies into the use of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy in subjects with PTSD would similarly benefit from having a personal experience with MDMA within a legal training program.

From many points of view, my own experience convinces me that the knowledgeable and responsible use of psychedelic drugs could be a boon to psychotherapeutic practice. For decades I have lamented the banning of research into this possibility. My LSD experience was nothing but positive, and it resulted in personal and professional benefit for me and for the many I have served in various professional roles.

I am happy to share my understanding of these matters. My sharing is but meager repayment for the advantage I was given. In these times of unprecedented cultural upheaval, I wish that psychedelic research would advance so that potentially powerful tools adequate to our contemporary global human challenge might be more readily available.

Sincerely,


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Professor of Psychology
