LANGUAGE AND REALITY — OUR CHOICES OF WORDS AFFECT HOW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES ARE PERCEIVED

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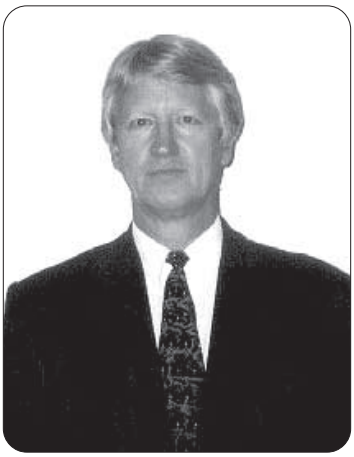

The persistence of the terms "hallucinogen," "hallucinogenic," and "hallucination(s)" in our attempts to describe the effects of consciousness-enhancing substances, whether natural or synthetic, is puzzling and frustrating. While appropriate to describe one of the possible effects of LSD use, these terms rarely or never apply to most of the other chemical entities which, unfortunately, have become widely known as "hallucinogens." Most readers of MAPS are well aware of the real beneficial effects which can be realized from the appropriate use of substances like ayahuasca, peyote, psilocybin mushrooms, MDMA, cannabis, etc. They are also aware of the uninformed, fearful, and organized resistance to the use of these substances that comes from much of the government, academia, and the public. This attitude applies even to scientific experimentation with consciousness-enhancing substances (most often referred to by the pejorative term "drugs"), even if the purpose of such research is to determine their indications, mechanism of action, safety, and efficacy.

In strong contrast to this, other categories of consciousness-altering or mood- and affect-altering substances are generally accepted, and even powerfully promoted. Drugs such as ethyl alcohol, nicotine in various tobacco products, and caffeine in coffee have nearly achieved the status of social icons, though tobacco has recently lost some of its luster. This exalted status exists despite the fact that alcohol and tobacco, combined, are directly responsible for the premature deaths of approximately 600,000 people per year in the United States. Other consciousness-altering substances have earned the term "medications," though even the term "drug," in the context of medical use, carries the authority of the medical and pharmaceutical establishment ("drugstore" for example). These medications include four categories of anti-depressants, anti-manic (bimodal) agents, four categories of anti-psychotics, three categories of anxiolytics/hypnotics, and the sympathomimetics/stimulants/anorexiants.

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While not impugning the efficacy and benefit of many of these medications, it can be argued that many if not most of them serve the purpose of covering up or assuaging a psychic disequilibrium rather than aiding the search for the source of the dis-

equilibrium. Once recognized, the issues can be resolved, creating a more conscious, healthier, and more equilibrated human being. And this, in fact, is the real potential offered by the currently vilified consciousness-enhancing or "psychedelic" drugs. But, in the ultimate irony, even some of the people who best understand these drugs, who wish to promote greater freedom for their investigation and use, continue to use pejorative terms such as "hallucinogen" to describe them!

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In contrast, and to its credit, the orthodox (allopathic) medical establishment has had outstanding success in promoting its own accepted forms of substance use in nearly every area of life. This success is due in large part to deliberate attention to language. When careful, acceptable terms are chosen to describe a credible mechanism of action or effect of a substance proposed for use, whether correct or incorrect, this use is accepted.

A hallucination is defined as "the perception of something which does not exist in objective reality." How, then, do "hallucinogens" fit into science, the method by which we come to understand reality? Indeed, how do we gain knowledge through the experience of unreality? Yet, with all due respect, this seems to be what is being advocated, and even by the most esteemed pioneers and scientists in our field. An example only slightly removed from the present is the seminal book *Plants of the Gods, Their Sacred, Healing, and Hallucinogenic Powers*, by Richard Evans Schultes and Albert Hofmann (1992). On the back cover our friend Dr. Mark Plotkin endorses it as "the best book ever written on hallucinogenic plants." Michael R. Aldrich, Ph.D. also uses the term "hallucinogenic plants" in his endorsement, which includes the opinion "carefully researched." The subsequent back-cover description by the publisher states: "The most powerful of those plants, which are known to transport the human mind into other states of consciousness, have always been regarded as sacred." That statement I do accept. However, the prior language is then used over and over again by the distinguished authors, including the term "sacred hallucinogens" in describing the phytochemicals written about in the text.

Without question, *Plants of the Gods* is a brilliant work. But, at the substantial risk of sounding condescending, I offer that not only is "hallucination" an inaccurate term to describe one of the key effects of using these substances, but that the term "sacred hallucinogen" is an oxymoron. Sacred, as I understand it, refers to The Reality. A hallucinogen, as previously defined, produces "a perception which does NOT exist in reality." Thus, we have: "the unreality producer of The Ultimate Reality."

My substantial experience with at least one combination of these sacred plants, hoasca, is that these substances can give us a *clearer* vision of reality, and thus are not hallucinogenic, despite their capacity to produce profound visual alterations in what we may normally perceive. Isn't the appropriate term for what is happening not "hallucinations," but "visions?" I like the terms "visions" and "vision-inducing" because they open one to contemplate a large range of possibilities within the powers of the human visual apparatus, including not only the eyes, and the optic nerves and tracts, but also the visual cortex in the occipital lobes, its interconnections, and the human visual experience. Moreover, the term "vision" has a much more positive connotation within human thought than "hallucination."

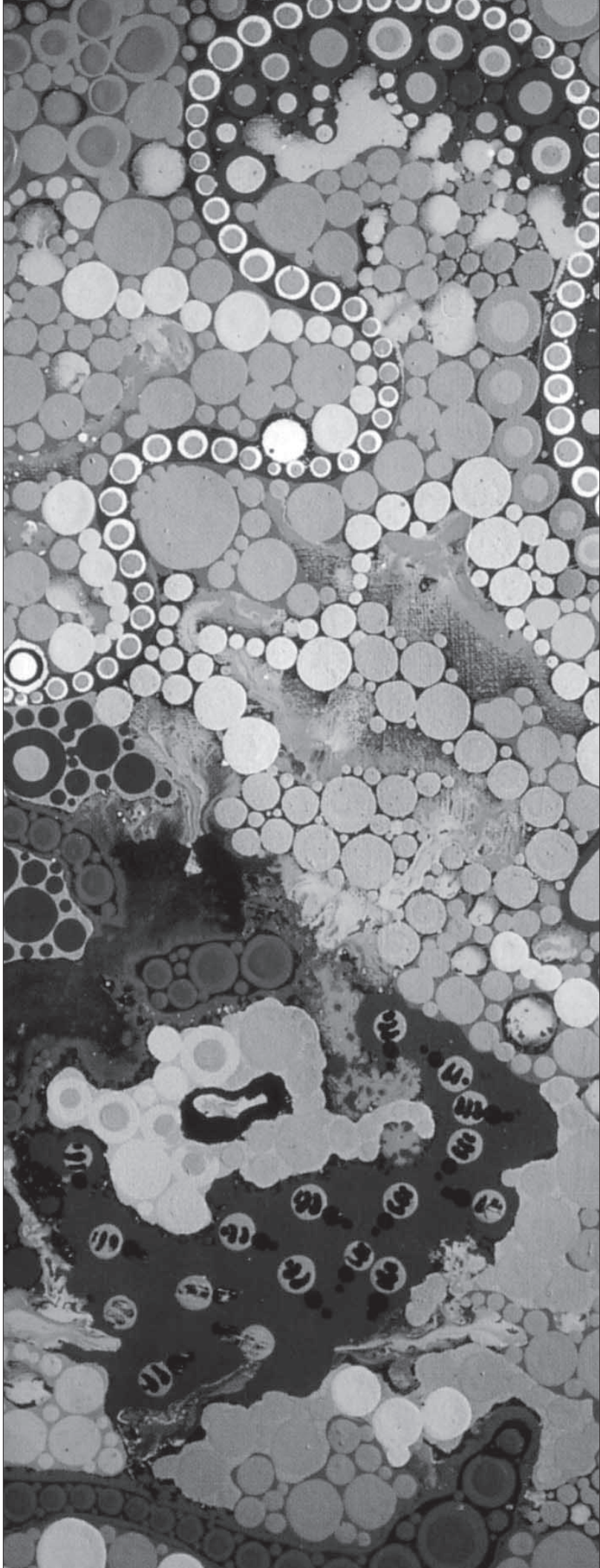
As a practicing physician in Emergency Medicine, I have certainly seen many people hal-

lucinating. Hallucinations are caused by some induced disturbance of the normal function of the brain such as dehydration, metabolic disturbances, exhaustion, alcohol and certain prescription, over-the-counter or street drugs, fever, mental illness, etc.

This medical association makes it a daunting task to explain to a grand jury of common citizens, to federal prosecutors, or to a federal judge the logic behind granting legal protection for a religious practice which uses a consciousness-enhancing substance commonly called a "hallucinogen." Indeed, from September 1999 to November 2001, I argued in each of the above forums, as a plaintiff and scientific expert in the UDV v. Ashcroft, et al. case, that hoasca is not a hallucinogen. My belief is that the UDV's determined effort in this case to clarify and defend what we feel are the real effects of hoasca was an important factor in the favorable decision we recently received in federal district court. This decision compelled the U.S. government to allow us to resume our religious practice, which is based on the sacramental ingestion of hoasca.

Gaining permission from the Food and Drug Administration to perform research into the use of "hallucinogenic" drugs is equally difficult. Our unfortunate choice of descriptive language is one reason why research into and use of these substances are being so strongly resisted.

Clearly, there is a far deeper discussion behind all of this. It relates to how we each understand and can describe this "invisible landscape" which has been so courageously explored by so many people. A better sense of how we understand and present ourselves will help us regain more extensive social license to investigate this realm. It will also help us apply the knowledge we gain to solving real problems of human existence, and to enhance our ability to perceive the peace, the beauty, the joy, and the love which are inherent in life. ■



Pituri Bushes
Walangari Karntawarra Jakamarra
from Plants of the Gods