

My Personal Experience with Cancer, Psychedelics, and Medical Marijuana

By Liana

Liana can be contacted at
askmaps@maps.org

I'm a 52-year-old neuropsychologist, wife, mother, and grandmother who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2002. Fortunately, it was discovered early and did not appear to have spread beyond one ovary. After surgery and chemotherapy, my doctors thought there was a very good chance that the cancer would not recur. There was no sign of recurrence until January 2005, when the score on my CA125 (cancer marker blood test) started to rise, suggesting that the cancer was back.

Having believed for many years in the therapeutic use of psychedelics, I decided it was time to put my money where my mouth was.

When I was first diagnosed in 2002, I was certain I'd be fine. Now that it looked as though I was having a recurrence, however, for the first time it seemed possible that this just might kill me. Thanks to prior psychedelic and other life experiences, I didn't consider myself to be particularly afraid of death, but the thought of the suffering and pain associated with death from cancer was quite frightening to me. I also still had too many things I wanted to do, particularly helping to raise my granddaughter. I was quite distraught about the possibility of dying within the next few years. Although I managed to get to work and functioned okay there, when my mind wasn't occupied with work it was hard to think about anything but my uncertain future.

I remembered an article I had read years ago in the *MAPS Bulletin* ("Ayahuasca and Cancer: One Man's Experience," 1998, Volume VIII, No. 3, p. 22-27) by Dr. Donald Topping. He seemed to have been able to cure a recurrence of liver cancer during an ayahuasca session. (He unexpectedly lived for several more good years, although he did eventually succumb to cancer.) Having believed for many years in the therapeutic use of psychedelics, I decided it was time to put my money where my mouth was.

Fortunately, I was able to arrange an ayahuasca session. My guide arrived early in the morning carrying a black bag and what looked like a keg of moonshine. We took a lot of time choosing a space in my home for the trip and finally settled on the living room, with me on the couch. We drew the shades, turned off the lights, lit lots of candles, and moved my favorite piece of art and source of inspiration, a Tibetan thangka depicting Avalokiteshvara, into the living room. My guide did smoke offerings, dedicating the trip, and put music on. I took the medicine and donned eyeshades.

When the trip was well under way, my guide had me ask the spirit of ayahuasca if I still had cancer. I seemed to feel the plant spirit scanning my body like a CT scan, from left to right, looking for cancer cells. The spirit did not seem to find anything. My guide asked if I could see the plant spirit. I could not see it, but I could feel it physically. He suggested the spirit not only scan, but also clean out any cancer cells and chemotherapy residues. He had me imagine a purification fire, with flames burning me clean.

I was not having any visual hallucinations, so my guide offered a booster dose. When that took effect, I went to a whole new level, with beautiful colors and

patterns. With eye shades on and eyes closed, I saw the Plant Spirit in the right side of my field of vision. I was expecting jaguars and snakes, having read the literature, but he showed himself to me as The Hunter, holding a bow and arrow and other symbolic items that I couldn't quite make out. I expressed thanks to him and asked if he would now be one of my guides. He accepted and our energies merged. I experienced an incredible feeling of thankfulness and grace. The Plant Spirit and I whirled around in a cosmic dance for a while, then that stopped and I felt all sorts of unusual but pleasant physical sensations. I heard a mixture of sounds including human voices, digestive sounds, bits of cartoon soundtracks, etc., the same as those I've heard on LSD. As always, no specific words were decipherable.

My guide and I did other explorations regarding relationships with family members, etc. Once in a while, when we were discussing some difficult aspect of my life, I vomited into a bucket that had been placed next to me. As others had told me, the vomiting seemed to be a way of purging toxins from the body and was not terribly unpleasant. In general, I felt quite good and not nauseated.

After a number of hours, my guide left and I settled into bed. There was a period of time during which I got dizzy every time I moved until I was able to interpret that as follows: Everything is actually always spinning out of control. I have to relax and let it happen, let it spin, not try to control it, just go with it.

When the effects of the ayahuasca wore off, which took about 24 hours, I was left with a marvelous feeling of relief. I was completely certain that I was not having a recurrence and I stopped worrying about it. After additional blood tests, CT scans, and an MRI, it looked as though it was true. My doctors didn't know why I had had those scary lab test results, but my labs returned to the normal range and I seemed to be fine. I felt that ayahuasca had allowed me to look into my body and know what was happening before my doctors could figure it out. Rather than being worried and stressed during those months of tests, I had peace of mind.

Things were not as they seemed, however. One very full and happy year after my ayahuasca experience, my CA125 score began to rise again, this time with frightening speed. I had little time to search out another ayahuasca session and chose instead to try psilocybin cubensis with a close friend who is an experienced guide. Although it was not 100% certain that the cancer was back, it was extremely likely. Thus I approached this trip with a very different mindset than any trip I had ever taken before. I

had been thinking a lot about my own death. It happens that at that time I was reading Christopher Bache's book *Dark Night, Early Dawn* in which he describes some extremely dark LSD experiences in great detail. Given this fuel for my imagination, on the morning of the trip I found myself feeling terrified. My friend/guide arrived and we talked about my plans for this trip. He did a wonderful blessing, which was quite comforting. He gave me a blue crystal to hold for a while. It reminded me of the sky and helped change my state of mind to spaciousness and openness rather than fear. Then I ate the mushrooms. As soon as they began to work it was clear that this wasn't going to be a horror trip. I should have known to trust the medicine.

Once I was feeling the full effects, my friend instructed me to close my eyes and scan my body. I was able to do so to a point, but I kept becoming afraid and opening my eyes again when it started feeling very dense and heavy. We talked about my fears, of mutilation from additional surgeries, of a long and painful death. My friend, who has had experience with other cancer patients, was very comforting. I tried going deeper, but was unable to find anything bad in my body that needed to be expelled. After the ayahuasca experience I was somehow expecting to purge, but that did not happen.

I kept trying to look into my body, as closely as I could tolerate. Rather than seeing illness or decay, I felt very alive, healthy, and vibrant. Although I got the sense the cancer was back, I couldn't identify any invading cells. The message I got was that I could not rid my body of cancer. For reasons unknown to me, some of my cells had mutated into cancer cells, but they were still my own cells rather than foreign bodies (e.g., virus, bacteria). I was not going to be able to sweep them into a nice, neat pile and purge them from my body. My task now was to learn to live (or die) with them. The upcoming six-month period, during which I would undergo another round of chemotherapy, was reframed as a six-month retreat. I was to use that time for healing and spiritual practice. I am a Buddhist practitioner and already had been taught some healing practices during my previous round of chemo. Now I would have the opportunity to devote more time to those. There would also be time to work on psychological issues, and so I decided to find a good therapist to help me through this time of crisis and self-healing. I got the sense that I would have some degree of control over what happened to my body on a cellular level. If I took care of myself, deepened my spiritual practice, and tried to make my work a part of my

In the meantime,
rather than
wasting time
anticipating
the worst,
I shouldn't
let the cancer
stop me from
enjoying life.

spiritual practice, I felt confident that I could hold the cancer cells at bay for at least a while, hopefully long enough for my granddaughter to reach her teens. In the meantime, rather than wasting time anticipating the worst, I shouldn't let the cancer stop me from enjoying life. It was such a blessing to be able to get this perspective when coping with my illness. This would help me to learn from it, rather than spending the rest of my days in a state of panic or denial.

The trip ended and life went on. At first, there was nothing on CT scan, but then a month later another scan showed several tiny tumors and I immediately began another round of chemotherapy. Obviously, the "all clear" message I thought I had gotten during my ayahuasca trip in 2005 had not been correct. I do believe, however, that it gave me peace of mind and possibly staved off the cancer for an additional year, and for that I am extremely grateful.

Now it has been almost four months since I left work to undergo this second course of chemotherapy. I have explored Buddhist thought regarding the process of death and rebirth and have done a lot of spiritual practice. I have a wonderful therapist who has helped me cope with the stress of being severely ill. With my therapist I have focused on the dynamics of my relationships with my husband, family, and friends that have been making this process both easier (via incredible emotional support) and more difficult (via old maladaptive patterns of interaction). I am much less stressed out and fearful than I was when the chemotherapy began. I'm confident that I'll have a good period of remission during which I can spend more quality time with my family, go back to my work as a neuropsychologist and psychologist, and accomplish some of those things outside of work that I had been putting off until "later".

I would like to end this article by briefly discussing my experiences with medical marijuana and the prescription drug, Marinol. The first of my six chemotherapy treatments was worse than I remembered it having ever been during my previous round of therapy, and I despaired at having to go through that five more times. The anti-nausea medications my doctor had prescribed didn't work that well and had unpleasant side effects.

Although my doctor had never mentioned Marinol or marijuana as alternative treatments, once I asked about them he immediately wrote me a prescription for Marinol. He also wrote me a letter stating that I was a candidate for medical marijuana. Since I live in California, the letter was

all I needed to legally possess, use, and even grow marijuana for my personal use.

Marinol worked quite well, eliminating the nausea completely, but it sometimes made me so stoned that it was unpleasant. Twice I had anxiety attacks from it, during which I was unable to control obsessive, worried thoughts. In addition, I developed a tolerance to the anti-nausea effect after a day or two. I went to a local Pot Club and purchased a potpourri (no pun intended) of products, including pot, chocolate truffles, a candy bar, and something called "tincture" which, the salesperson assured me, would not get me stoned. The edible goodies worked and

did not give me anxiety attacks, but after 3 or 4 days I became bored with being stoned, unable to do anything but lie around and listen to music. With some skepticism, I switched to the tincture and, amazingly, it worked like a charm without getting me stoned.

All the edible pot products, including Marinol and the tincture, took up to an hour to work. With a little experimentation, I learned that I could smoke a little pot first, which worked immediately, and that way I would feel okay while waiting for the edibles to kick in. I used very mild pot so I could still function to a degree after I smoked it.

I want everyone who is going through chemotherapy to know that this line of treatment is amazingly helpful. Interestingly, even here in "liberal" California, I had to specifically ask my doctor for these products. One MD friend who recently attended a Continuing Medical Education course

on end of life issues, pain management, and palliative care told me that medical marijuana was never even mentioned. Why is that?

Obviously, there is a stigma attached to marijuana and psychedelics, and as a result many people who could benefit from them are denied safe, legal access. Rather than being seen as part of the "War on Drugs", their therapeutic and medicinal potentials should be fully investigated and made readily available to everyone who could potentially benefit from them. •

Interestingly,
even here
in "liberal"
California,
I had to
specifically ask
my doctor
for these
products.

