

As evidenced by the photo on the back cover, guest editor David Jay Brown has looked death in the eye and not flinched. David took this picture of his close friend Elizabeth Gips after she had died and after her body had been lovingly prepared as a form of honor, celebration and commemoration. We pondered at length—both together in our deliberations and apart during quiet personal reflections—on whether it would feel beautiful and awesome to actually use this photo on the back cover, or whether it would be too off-putting, too frightening, or simply unpleasant. Typically, an image such as this causes us to instinctually turn away. However, we became persuaded to publish the photo as we recognized both the dignity and love that shines through the image and the rarity of such a picture. We intend for this portrait to help us all come to terms with the fear that death engenders and to see through this fear to the wholesomeness of death.

It is timely to focus this special issue of the *MAPS Bulletin* on psychedelics, death and dying when both MAPS and the Heffter Research Institute are conducting studies investigating the use of psychedelics in patients who are facing life-threatening illnesses, to help them to cope with the anxiety associated with their upcoming deaths.

The picture of Elizabeth brought to mind a moment of emotional clarity for me, a moment which took place at the funeral of my friend and ally Nicholas Saunders. Nicholas died suddenly in an automobile accident, as the passenger in a car that slid off a narrow shoulder of a hilly road and tumbled over and over. Nicholas was buried on his own property, in a simple wooden coffin that children in his community decorated with crayons and magic markers. I marveled at the proximity of children laughing and playing with death inches away—particularly since it was unsettling for me to be so tangibly close to the body of a friend who was no longer alive. The scene seemed so fundamentally healthy that a portion of my fear of death noticeably dissolved in those moments.

Intellectually, I've come to appreciate and welcome death as the central fact that gives life meaning, poignancy, and value. Without death, with infinite life ahead of us, there would be no urgency, no need for action, no value to the passing of time, no arc from birth to death, no point and no purpose. Emotionally, death makes life and love shine like the stars amidst the darkness of the sky. Intellectually, I see death as necessary and essential, to be cherished and accepted despite the pangs of sadness and loss that follow in its wake—especially after an untimely death. Even after an untimely, tragic death, the pain is in some measure related to the joy produced by the life that first came into being before it was extinguished.

Lately, I've been reflecting on the statement, "Nothing lasts, nothing is lost," attributed, perhaps correctly, to "sacred Indian writings." It is clear that nothing lasts. Whether nothing is lost isn't so clear, though it's certainly a comforting thought. But even if nothing lasts and everything is lost, there is still the intrinsic value of the moment. The present moment, ultimately, is more than enough, a gift of grace of unfathomable value, which our friend and lover death paints in stark relief.

What is more difficult for me now are the slow encroachments that death makes, the inroads of decay and decline. Yesterday, I needed glasses as my eyes lost focus, today my hair retreats, tomorrow it will be something else that slips away. I try to see and accept these changes, and to extract from that knowledge an increased appreciation for the preciousness of each remaining moment. Even the sight of my children growing up and exploring ever wider outside our home, is both a sign of their waxing and my waning.

Despite the tolls of aging, I feel like I'm still gathering momentum, insight and joy. This feeling arises from my profound relationships with my family, friends and colleagues, and my invigorating work with MAPS. I am blessed to be at the helm of an organization with such breadth of support. Every day I get to work for MAPS, I know that there are thousands of people who are patiently lifting us up toward our goals. I am grateful to have this life to work toward the creation of legal and safe contexts for people to benefit from psychedelic psychotherapy and spirituality.

As you read this special issue of the *MAPS Bulletin*, we'll be looking together at death through the psychedelic lens. As people have found for thousands of years, psychedelics, when well-used, serve to create more appreciation for the miracle of our everyday lives. How fortunate are we to have found that psychedelics can contribute to a heightened sense of the rewards of work towards social justice, human rights, and the gradual expansion of our psychedelic and medical marijuana research projects—which our collective efforts make possible.



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