

## From the Editor: David Jay Brown

Photo by Dee DeBruno



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**WHEN** acclaimed novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley was dying, his final words were: “LSD, 100 micrograms I.M.” Huxley’s wife Laura complied with his wishes, and the celebrated author of *Brave New World* crossed over the post-biological threshold into the White Light with Hofmann’s magic molecules nestled into the synapses of his brain. My dear friend and mentor, Dr. Oscar Janiger—who conducted many of the early LSD and creativity studies—followed in Huxley’s footsteps and also departed from this world while tripping on LSD (which is recounted for the first time in this Bulletin by Rio Hahn).

I’ve visualized these historical sequences many times, wondering what it was like for great minds like Huxley and Janiger to die while tripping on LSD. The inspiration for these final journeys were based upon the work that early LSD researchers had done with terminally ill patients; however, the relationship between the psychedelic experience and the experience of dying, death, and rebirth is ancient, and likely began in prehistory. Modern cultural links in art and music abound, and it’s no accident that the most celebrated psychedelic rock band of all-time is known as The Grateful Dead.

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Some of the most valuable and promising research that’s been conducted with psychedelics has been in the area of treating the terminally ill. For example, the studies of psychiatric researcher Stanislav Grof and colleagues at Spring Grove State Hospital in Baltimore, with terminally ill patients, provided strong evidence that a psychedelic experience can be immensely beneficial for people in their final stages of life.

Between the years 1967 and 1972, studies with terminal cancer patients by Grof and colleagues at Spring Grove showed that LSD combined with psychotherapy could alleviate symptoms of depression, tension, anxiety, sleep disturbances, psychological withdrawal, and even severe physical pain that was resistant to opiates. It also improved communication between the patients and their loved ones. Grof joins us in this special issue to share his thoughts on this subject, as does Orenda Institute Director Richard Yensen, Ph.D., who studied psychedelic psychotherapy with Grof at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center.

Also joining us is medical anthropologist and Buddhist Roshi Joan Halifax, Ph.D., who

worked on the studies at Spring Grove with Grof as well. Halifax—who has done extensive work with the dying for over forty years, and in 1994 founded the Project on Being with Dying, which has trained hundreds of healthcare professionals in the contemplative care of dying people—attributes part of her motivation for working with dying people to the LSD research that she did with terminal cancer patients.

For this *Bulletin*, I also interviewed MAPS-sponsored Swiss psychiatrist Peter Gasser, M.D. and Johns Hopkins psychopharmacologist Roland Griffiths, Ph.D., who are currently conducting psychedelic research with subjects who are nearing end of life. UCLA researchers Charles Grob, M.D. and Alicia Danforth, Ph.D. also join us in this special issue to share their current research that is studying how psilocybin might help to ease the anxiety around dying.

Considering that the dying process is probably the most universally feared of all human experiences, that the death of loved ones causes more suffering in this world than anything else, and that death appears to be an inevitable fact of nature—it seems like it

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might be a good idea to pay attention to what researchers have learned about how psychedelics can help to ease the dying process. That's why this special edition of the *MAPS Bulletin* brings together scientific researchers, undertakers, caregivers, physicians, poets and artists to explore the important relationship between psychedelics, death and dying.

#### **Death of the Ego**

One of the most commonly reported experiences that people have with the classical psychedelics is a sense of boundary-dissolving unity, where one's personal consciousness merges with a much larger transpersonal planetary or cosmic awareness. This period of "ego death"—where the individual personality dissolves and consciousness remains—is followed by a "rebirth" of the ego, which now incorporates the higher perspective of cosmic unity. Reports of this personality-dissolving experience stretch back to ancient shamanic traditions from all around the world, and it is considered by many people to be an archetypal feature of the psychedelic experience. A lot of people think that they're actually dying during a psychedelic experience, and they find themselves letting go of their lives, surrendering their egos, and merging with a timeless state of consciousness. John Harrison shares his thoughts about this subject in an essay that he contributed to this Bulletin, and Kolya Djzivkovic recounts an archetypal death and rebirth experience that he had with psilocybin mushrooms at the age of nine.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—a religious manual about how to navigate through post-corporeal space, which is read to Tibetan Buddhists as they're dying—is also known for its uncanny application to the psychedelic experience. In fact, the first LSD-tripping manual—*The Psychedelic Experience*—was based upon an interpretation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Timothy Leary, Ph.D., Richard Alpert, Ph.D. (Ram Dass), and Ralph Metzner, Ph.D. Ralph Metzner joins us in this special issue to revisit this fascinating religious literature, and share the views that he has developed on this subject since *The Psychedelic Experience* was first published in 1964.

Many people believe that psychedelic experiences can not only give us insight into what happens after we die, but that they actually model or simulate the afterlife experience to a certain extent. Rick Strassman's research with the powerful psychedelic DMT (which is also found naturally in the brain), and Karl Jansen's work with the dissociative psychedelic ketamine, may provide evidence for the type of biochemical and psychological changes that occur in the brain when we're dying, as they appear to simulate some important features of the near-death experience. (For more information about this important research see Strassman's *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* and Karl Jansen's *Ketamine: Dreams and Realities*.)

When I asked Rick Strassman how he thought that the DMT experience is related to the near-death experience, he replied, "I hypothesize that DMT levels rise with the stress associated with near-death experiences, and mediate some of the more "psychedelic" features of this state." To explore these ideas further, I interviewed parapsychologist and altered states expert Charles Tart, Ph.D. about the similarities and differences between a psychedelic experience and a near-death experience for this Bulletin.

#### **What Happens After We Die?**

One of the questions that I've asked almost everyone who I interviewed over the past twenty years is: What do you think happens to consciousness after we die? I've asked this question to many dozens of renowned thinkers—many of whom have experimented with psychedelics—as both an exercise of the imagination and a form of spiritual exploration. Personally, I think that this is one of the most fascinating mysteries in all of nature—and with inconclusive evidence on all sides of this mystery, I think that it's safe to say that no human being has the slightest idea what really happens to consciousness after death. There is an abundance of compelling evidence for and against the notion that consciousness survives death, but, nonetheless, death remains, as the late ethnobotanist Terence McKenna said, "the black hole of biology."

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Years ago, I was hiking through the hills of Big Sur, California with my dear friend, artist and poet Carolyn Mary Kleefeld. We came to the top of a hill and looked down into the valley below. There, in the center of the valley, was the rotting corpse of a dead horse. All over the hillside the grass was brown and dry—except around the decaying corpse, which was surrounded by a ring of bright green grass. The fluid and transformative nature of life energy couldn't have been more obvious to us than it was then. If consciousness is a form of energy, then it might flow on in some form after death too. Carolyn Kleefeld (who did the beautiful artwork for the cover of the *MAPS Bulletin* that I edited on technology and psychedelics) also joins us in this special issue to share some of her wisdom-filled poetry and art about death and the transformation of consciousness.

### **Design For Dying**

When the late LSD researcher and psychologist Timothy Leary, Ph.D. was dying of cancer he announced to the world that he was “thrilled” and “ecstatic” to be entering the mystery of death. Tim spent the last year of his life celebrating, and interacting with the media, really enjoying himself, despite his illness. Many people in human history have attempted to die with dignity, peace of mind, or as a process of spiritual awakening, but it was Tim's admirable and innovative idea to try and make dying fun and exciting. I was fortunate to have been able to spend time with Tim while he was dying, and witnessed how he courageously and playfully utilized his dying process as a way to help change our culture's negative attitudes about death. Tim told me that one should approach death in the same way that one approaches a psychedelic experience, with special attention to set and setting. He suggested crossing over the threshold surrounded by sacred music and beautiful art, loving friends and family, flowers, incense, and candles.

My dear friend Valerie Corral, cofounder of the world's most leading-edge and politically successful medical cannabis cooperative, the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana (WAMM), spends much of her time with people who are dying. Like Grof, Leary, and Halifax, Valerie has also been a powerful force in changing our culture's views about

death, and the form of hospice care that she helped to create, utilizes cannabis, not only for its medical properties and symptom relief, but also for its psychedelic mind-changing properties, and potential for psychological and spiritual transformation. Valerie joins us in this special issue to share a mystical experience that she had while her dad was dying, and how the recent death of her brother impacted her. Also joining us in this special issue is British undertaker Rupert Callender, who describes his work with ecologically-friendly burials, and explores conscious alternatives to conventional funerals using psychedelic therapy.

Death is the hardest thing to face about life, to accept that our time here is temporary. A lot of people successfully ignore thinking about this obvious fact for much of their lives, but I think it's vital to always remember that every moment is sacred, and each embodied second is precious. Maybe there are wonderful new and everlasting adventures awaiting us after we die. After experiencing the powerful mind-altering perspective of a deep psychedelic experience, it's hard for me to believe that consciousness doesn't continue on in some form—but, of course, this could all be a magnificent illusion. However, despite the ever-mysterious metaphysical truth hiding inside us about the ultimate source of consciousness, the dying process itself appears to be significantly eased by psychedelic therapy. So we can all be thankful for this, and rejoice that these promising therapies are once again being explored by modern medicine.

When asked, if there was something that psychedelics could teach us about death, spiritual philosopher Ram Dass replied, “Yes, absolutely. Starting with Erik Kast's work back in the sixties at the University of Chicago. One quote from his work stands out in my mind. It was from a nurse who was dying of cancer and had just taken LSD. She said, “I know I'm dying of this deadly disease, but look at the beauty of the universe.”

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