

A Time of Reflection

LISTENING TO THE PLANTS: A MANIFESTO



THE AYAVOLVE INSTITUTE
FOR PSYCHEDELIC INTEGRATION

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"Our grandparents taught us that we belong to a big family of plants and animals. We believe that everything in the planet forms part of a big family."

—**FORMER BOLIVIAN
FOREIGN MINISTER, DAVID
CHOQUEHUANCA (2011)**

"I feel that my identity is tied to so many things. It is tied to the land. It is tied to the trees that surround the land. It is tied to my ancestors. It is tied to the people who are around. It is tied to the animals that I grew up knowing and them knowing me. To try to identify myself as a separate person outside of those things and their values, you don't really get a full picture of me."

—**SOBONFU SOME' (2016)**

"In some Native languages the term for plants translates to, 'those who take care of us.'"

—**ROBIN WALL KIMMERER (2015)**

"Along with the other animals, the stones, the trees, and the clouds, we ourselves are characters within a huge story that is visibly unfolding all around us, participants within the vast imagination, or Dreaming, of the world."

—**DAVID ABRAMS (1997)**

"The principle difference between Western and indigenous ways of being is that even the most open-minded Westerner generally views listening to the natural world as a metaphor, as opposed to the way the world really is. Trees and rocks and rivers really do have things to say to us."

—**DERRICK JENSEN (2009)**

1. OVERVIEW

WHY WE NEED TO LISTEN TO PLANTS

Having witnessed hundreds of people heal their mind, body and spirits in unexpected ways through working with plant medicines, I know firsthand how powerful and healing plant medicines and plant medicine experiences can be. I have my own reverence for plants as master teachers and healers as well as my own personal knowing of the power of nature, its beauty and its aliveness. These experiences as well as my background in researching ayahuasca as a potential antidote to some of the damage Westernization and dominant culture has had on the world, have led me to see some major gaps in understanding as well as important questions not being explored in the larger conversations had on topics such as: psychedelic assisted therapy, plant medicines, academic research exploring the benefits of psychedelic medicines, those moving towards commercial and medical use of psychedelic plant medicines, as well

as missing in conversations within the underground psychedelic movement.

My goal in writing this essay is to explore some of the missing conversations and questions in the hope of opening up a larger dialogue within our communities, and most importantly to open a dialogue with the psychedelic medicines themselves so that we may learn how we can honor these medicines and give them the reverence that they deserve.

Although the focus of this essay is on plant medicines specifically, I believe there is overlap regarding chemical based psychedelic medicines and will explore that potential as well.

"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues."

—DR. SEUSS, THE LORAX

To start this discussion, my observation and position is that we, as a community, are not honoring the spirit of plant medicines in a way that they deserve. And much like the Lorax, who speaks for the trees for they cannot speak for themselves, I feel obligated to speak for these master healer plants; to include them and grant them voice in the overall discussion of psychedelics.

The more popular these medicines become, the further we seem to move from the indigenous worldview and context in how plant medicines are worked with, and instead become more entrenched in the dominant worldview and approaches. While dialoguing with the plants may sound odd to some, listening to the plants and connecting with their power is a common practice among medicine people worldwide. I find it troubling that so many at the forefront of psychedelic research and prominent in the underground have had profound plant medicine experiences and walk away with a palpable direct knowing that the plants themselves are sentient, yet it continues to be a cultural taboo to acknowledge the sentience of these plants. Some may frame the idea of listening to the plants as trivial, silly, unrealistic or overly esoteric, and yet it is a foundational practice of many healers and those with long standing traditions of working with plant

medicines worldwide. I argue, if people are working with and researching these medicines that they stop solely looking at psychedelics through an academic and Western scientific lens. Instead, we need to include and integrate a more indigenous way of approaching these medicines. We need to cease the perpetuation of the taboos regarding the sentience of plants and the fear around acknowledging their spiritual qualities. We need to honor them, and our relationship with them, as sacred.

While some folks within the psychedelic medicine contexts and communities do offer some attribution and respect to the indigenous people with whom many medicine traditions originate, it is not nearly enough and there is a lack of depth in the understanding of some of the basic premises of the indigenous worldview. The plants should be honored, we should be operating and making decisions as if plants and the natural world are our relatives. This is a basic tenant of the indigenous worldview and will bring us in right relationship and harmony with the plants. In contrast, the dominant worldview places human beings at the center of the universe, promoting an anthropocentric view of the world. This shift from the dominant worldview to the indigenous worldview is needed now more than ever.

The aim of this essay is to ask important questions of the psychedelic and plant medicine communities in an attempt to open a larger dialogue on how we can best move forward in alignment with plant medicines and Mother Earth. I am not suggesting plant medicines are a panacea, nor that we romanticize indigenous peoples—there are real challenges no matter how we work with plant medicines. I am, however,

suggesting that we be open to learning new ways of understanding and dialoguing with the plants; for our own healing, for the healing of our communities and ultimately the healing of our planet. At this moment, the plant and psychedelic medicine community as a whole are operating in a way that is out of alignment with the consciousness of the plants, yet we can change this.

2. ALL THINGS ARE SACRED

WALKING WITHIN INDIGENOUS MODELS OF MEDICINE WORK

Most indigenous traditions, especially traditions which include plant medicine healing work, operate from the belief that all things in nature are sacred and have spirit within them; that all of nature has a spiritual essence. An indigenous approach to looking at plant medicines as wise teachers and elders is in sharp contrast to the ways in which those in the Western dominant culture are indoctrinated to view nature. As a Western person, not raised to view nature as a spiritual entity, I too have had to relearn, rethink and shed my own Western ideas in order to learn, over time, from elders how to develop a relationship with the plants in a more indigenous-oriented manner. The culture I have been raised in, and likely yours as well, does not honor, relate to nor conceive of nature in this way. Due to a lack of understanding and education of the indigenous worldview, deep respect of these medicines has only been given superficial acknowledgement within the psychedelic world and not taken far enough in terms of action, respect, behavioral change and deep listening.

Many indigenous peoples take their relationships with plants a step further, to suggest that not only do plants have a spirit, but that they each have their own unique personality, and that personality is something we need to respect, communicate with and honor in the same ways we would any healthy relationship we have. Some American Indian tribes (Deloria, 2000) teach that humans are, in fact, the youngest species and arrived last to this world. As a result, humans are the “younger siblings” of all the other species and have the most to learn from the natural world. How would our outlook and the outlook of the greater psychedelic community change if we related to the plants and the natural world as if they were our elders and we were their younger siblings?

We can also learn from the indigenous approach that everything has the potential to be a poison or a medicine, depending on how it is used. Tobacco has a spirit, cannabis has a spirit, ayahuasca has a spirit, psilocybin has a spirit, ibogaine has a spirit, as

do chemical psychedelic medicines such as MDMA, LSD and ketamine. When the practitioner and “patient” are together working in harmony with these master plants, they can be powerful medicines that heal and teach in ways Western medicine cannot. However, when these plant medicines are misused, they can become a poison.

It was only fairly recently that plant medicines were taken out of their original, nature-based context with trained healers to be put into medical contexts or have psychotherapeutic traditions layered on top of indigenous practices, ceremonies, rituals, initiations and forms of healing. This cultural mismatch and lack of understanding may be causing some issues we are not even aware of. When it comes to approaching plant medicines, I would argue that we need to put aside personal and collective agendas, goals, wants and intentions for a while so that we may examine if those things are compatible

or incompatible with the plant medicines. I believe it is time we all do a gut check in relationship to how we work with plant medicines. I also challenge the academic and research communities to move towards adopting indigenous values when formulating research questions and conducting psychedelic research. Do these questions and research pursuits align with indigenous values or are they more aligned with a dominant worldview? Who is benefiting from the research? Is the research being done in a way that honors the researcher, or honors the plants?

My ongoing question is, if the psychedelic movement honored the spirit and personality of plant medicines in a way that more aligned with the indigenous worldview, would things change in terms of how these medicines were approached, researched and worked with?

3. A POTENTIAL MODEL

LISTENING TO THE PLANT MEDICINES AND GRANTING THEM VOICE

One of my Indigenous elders told me many years ago, “Indigenous education 101. You sit your butt on the ground for a few days and just listen. You listen to what the trees tell you, the ground, the grass, the flowers, the insects. And then listen to the sun and the moon, and then the wind and on and on. And once you can stop and just listen you can start to see that these are our ancestors.”

What I am proposing is not an esoteric or a mystical idea that is out of reach or even difficult to do, but something very down to earth and practical. It comes down to walking our talk and taking time to listen to plant medicines as the teachers and healers they are; to stop assuming we know what they want, to become aware of the ways in which we project our own desires, egos, wishes, and delusions onto these medicines, instead to work to hear and receive the real messages from plant communications directly, without having these messages watered down or sugar coated.

PLANT MEDICINE AS THE HEAD OF THE BOARD

The image and model I propose for the remainder of this essay is that we create a board of directors (or from an indigenous context a talking circle or council). At the head of the board are the plant medicines themselves. They are granted a voice and veto power in how medicine work is done, how research is conducted as well as included in the discussion as it pertains to our conduct, actions and decisions within the psychedelic medicine community on the use and misuse of plant medicines.

I contend that at this moment of expansion in psychedelic research, of accelerated attention and acceptance of the healing potential of plant medicines and the increased use of these medicines, that we need their (the plants’) input about how to move forward in alignment with their greater vision. We need their input, wisdom and teachings to inform how we all move forward. We have allowed Western trained MDs

doing psychedelic medical research, psychonauts, psychotherapists, folks who want to start psychedelic churches and the media (including podcasters), who sensationalize plant medicines, to drive and frame the conversations about psychedelic medicines. All of whom have a financial stake in plant medicines and nearly all coming from

a dominant worldview context. All the while, the lineage keepers, indigenous peoples and the medicines themselves have been left voiceless. This needs to change. Instead, we need to start listening to the plant medicines as the authorities; to place them at the head of the board instead.

4. PLANT MEDICINES COMMUNICATE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

When thinking about plant communication, one of the challenges is that plant medicines communicate to us in an unfamiliar foreign language, which can be subtle and nuanced. Plants speak to us through a variety of modalities; words, metaphors, images, sensations, vibrations, thoughts and dreams to name a few. These forms of plant-based communication are accepted within an indigenous framework of understanding that the natural world is alive and allied with human life, but are in opposition to the dominant worldview, dominant educational models and dominant ways of thinking about nature which contend that communication is strictly a human/animal phenomenon. As Greg Cajete, Director of Native American Studies at the University of New Mexico (2010) explains, "Unless one is open to metaphoric thinking, Indigenous natural philosophy will remain mysterious because it has evolved from multi-level and multi-layered symbols that came to us long ago when we could talk to animals and hear the gods

or God more easily perhaps." My own qualitative research of hundreds of people showed that a high percentage of people who have, for instance, attended ayahuasca ceremonies walk away with a greater belief that the natural world is alive, or sentient (Kaufman, 2016).

Given that most of us were raised within a dominant worldview and dominant educational system, we have not been exposed to indigenous spirituality, indigenous sciences, nor ways of relating to nature within an indigenous cosmology. As a result, one way to start to learn the language of psychedelic medicines is similar to learning any foreign language, or in this case "plantese". We start with the foundational vocabulary, learn how to understand subtle and overt communications within different contexts, understand how to "think" and experience in that language and then slowly over time and with repetition, how to become fluent in the language of the plants. Linguist Noam Chomsky (1957) asserted that

we are born innately understanding how language works. We naturally acquire language through interacting with others and through conversation. I suggest that perhaps we also have an innate intuitive understanding of the language of the plants, and that we understand and have access to more plant-wisdom than we realize. The challenge is that in our cultural disconnection from nature and the natural world—and therefore parts of ourselves, we have been culturally trained to disconnect from our intuition, somatic self, creative centers and consequently view communication in a strictly Western definitional sense. I argue that one of the key lessons plant medicines have to offer us, is a reminder of this innate connection to nature so that we may re-envision this connection and in the process remember our instinctive capacity for plant communication.

To understand plant medicine communication and language it takes time, dedication, patience and persistence to forge relationships with these plants, to then learn from them and over time open an authentic dialogue. The messages in this language, by design, can often take a long time to decipher, as metaphoric and symbolic languages tend to do. Sadly, many within the psychedelic movement arrogantly purport to understand these languages, and even pontificate “messages from the medicine” without a basic understanding of the indigenous worldview or an indigenous approach to plant medicine, while only approaching plant medicines from a dominant/Western context.

5. MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISINTERPRETING THE PLANTS

In the ayahuasca community there is a joke about a man or woman who attends a ceremony the medicine “tells” them they are a shaman or should be a shaman. The person then goes to Peru, or wherever for a month, does a plant “dieta” or a few ceremonies, and then comes home proclaiming they are now a shaman. They start pouring medicine, leading medicine ceremonies and charging high prices. And if they come from a wealthy background, the medicine tells them to start a retreat center. I mention this joke to poke fun at a very dominant culture-way of mis-interpreting plant communication through the lens of individualism that shows a lack of understanding the communication altogether.

While plant medicines often convey important messages, it takes maturity, discernment and patience to interpret these messages in a grounded way. Many indigenous traditions believe that when spirits communicate with people it is only the beginning of a longer dialogue, whereby messages

are said to only be “real” after several different confirmations.

Another way to look at learning to communicate and dialogue with plants is to equate it with dating or relationships. If you began dating someone, you would not assume within three dates or conversations that you “knew” that person or understood them. However, after only one or two medicine experiences we frequently see folks proclaiming their understanding and insights of plant medicines. Like dating, at first you may have a spike in oxytocin or feel a state of infatuation. The excitement of a new relationship can cloud someone’s judgement from seeing all sides of a person, understanding their boundaries, listening to them and clearly seeing their strengths and weaknesses. The same is true for plant medicines. At first you may simply see or experience your own projections, but over time you may hear or understand what the plants are telling you at a much deeper level than you expected. And like

some relationships, plant medicines may test your commitment to the relationship by throwing you a curve ball such as providing you with a challenging experience. Yet, like any long-term relationship (or learning relationship), it requires moving from an individualistic understanding towards a more “relational” view. It means dialogue, respect and taking the “others” needs into consideration. In the case of plant medicines, it means looking at how committed you are to listening and learning from the plants over time.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW WE RELATE TO PLANT MEDICINES

- Is plant medicine research being done in a way that honors the spirit of the plant?
- Do you ask permission of the plant medicine before you consume it or sit in ceremony with it?

- Do you honor, in your own way, the lineages these medicines come from?
- Do you use these medicines to gain power or control over others?
- Do you try to profit from these medicines?
- Does the set and setting honor the plant medicine and is it done in the context THE PLANT wants it to be done in?

Ultimately, the bigger question is, do you work with psychedelic medicines in a way that THEY want to be worked with?

6. THE PLANTS ARE ALIVE

THE SENTIENCE OF THE PLANT WORLD

Interspecies communications

The understanding that plants can communicate with humans can be found within indigenous peoples worldwide. According to beloved American Indian scholar, Vine Deloria (2000), “There are plenty of Indian stories where a plant will appear in a dream and speak to someone, or a person is walking through the forest, and suddenly a plant will say, “I’m edible, but you’ve got to do these various things in order to eat me”. Deloria’s example points to cultural references of plant communication. As peoples from dominant culture, we are not exposed to these examples of plant communications; particularly we are not taught the unique communication styles of each plant, nor general models for developing relationships with the plants.

However, within the field of herbalism, communication with plants is more common and more accepted. Many herbalists routinely communicate with the spirits of plants, find specific plants in nature to use for healing based on their dialogue with plants, listen to the spirits of nature as to when and where

to pick a particular plant, perform rituals to honor plants and be in reciprocity with them as well as many other practices along these lines. My contention is that the psychedelic movement could learn quite a bit from these herbal traditions as potential role models on how to return to these nature-based traditions, rather than strive to be more Western in approach.

Ways of listening and relating to plants

There are many practical ways of connecting with and listening to plants and nature. The practices of forest bathing and its corollary, the Japanese practice of “shinrin-yoku,” both are forms of nature therapy. The basic premise of forest bathing is that healing can take place by being in nature, while purposefully being away from the energies and chaos of urban life. These practices begin by forgoing technology and slowing down, relaxing the body and deep breathing practices while in nature. The assumption is that when we slow down and open up our senses to the smells, colors, sounds, tactile

sensations and energies of nature we can start the process of dialoguing with nature. In some indigenous traditions, a person is taught to approach plants and nature by introducing themselves just as you would when meeting a fellow human. From there, as a sign of respect, making an offering—such as a pinch of tobacco, a prayer, a smile or simply your positive intention. I contend that these simple ways of honoring the plants should be much more commonplace within the psychedelic research community as well as with those who work with plant medicines and would go a long way in learning to listen to the plants.

A few potential scenarios: What would it be like if psilocybin researchers were required to talk to the mushrooms before working with them? What if ibogaine practitioners were invited to Gabon to sit with the iboga tree and pray for messages over days as a starting point in the process of learning to facilitate?

The language of unlearning

Not all communications with plants are about learning, dialogue or getting direct messages. Sometimes plant medicines help us to *unlearn* what dominant culture has taught us, to shed old identities, as well as ideas

of who we are and what we believe. A focus of my earlier research on ayahuasca explored how participating in ayahuasca ceremonies can help people move away from the trappings of dominant culture and move towards authentically embracing the indigenous worldview. During my interview research with those who had participated in more than 50 ayahuasca ceremonies, a number of themes emerged in the research data about unlearning various forms of dominant culture and Westernization.

I contend that ayahuasca and other plant medicines help us to challenge and *unlearn* many of our ingrained Western (dominant) beliefs and values. Unlearning within a plant medicine context is also a process of challenging cultural taboos, healing traumas, purging fears, shedding biases learned from our families and cultures, unlearning religious dogmas, unlearning destructive beliefs about the self, unlearning beliefs of individualism, survival of the fittest, life being a zero-sum game and instead moving towards cooperation, compassion, authenticity, courage, community, being “other” focused, expanding our capacity to love and to be loved, as well as finding a connection to a Great Mystery or Source of Creation/Creatrix within ourselves.

These forms of unlearning can often be summed up as plant medicines taking us into their universe and showing us how to see the beauty within ourselves, the beauty all around us and to let go of anything (unlearn) that contradicts that vision.

Asking the plants for help and guidance

Let's return to the image of plant medicines at the head of the board offering guidance on how to relate best with plant medicines; what actions may be encouraged or discouraged and what could we, as a community, do to repair our relationships with the plant medicines and plant spirits.

What if the plants say "no" to us?

As we sit down and listen to plant medicines, what happens if the plants say "no" to us? For instance, the plants may tell us not to attend a ceremony because it is not being done in a good way, not to research them in the way/s we envisioned, not to use them recreationally or without a facilitator, or say no to any manner of things we may think of. Then what? I would suggest that if the plants say "no" to us, we stop our actions, sit in contemplation and rethink what we are doing, then bring these questions

back to plants in the boardroom until we align with them. While dominant culture places a high significance on individuation and its implications of self-perceived freedom to pursue one's goals without the concern of the impact on others; indigenous plant medicine cultures do not. Dominant culture encourages and supports individual happiness over the welfare of others (especially over nature). I mention these aspects of dominant culture in order to suggest that being told "no" and questioning our actions as potentially being incompatible with the cosmovision of the plants, tends to elicit a tremendous amount of defensiveness in those who are not in the process of challenging and unlearning these dysfunctional and unsustainable Western beliefs. As a result, many of us act like defiant teenagers when we are asked to put others' (or in this case the plants) needs before, or on par with, our own. When we enter "the house" of plant medicines, we enter as a guest into their world, not as a boss or a taskmaster. In this way, when we hear or feel a "no" from plant medicines we should remain open minded and intellectually humble. Rather than react in a defensive manner, we should self-reflect, sit with questions and respect the boundaries and wishes of the plants. Instead, the norm is to operate with an "instant

gratification” mindset regarding plant medicines. Unfortunately, when we are disrespectful to the plants and ignore their communications there are often psychic, psychological and physical repercussions that may not be immediately evident to us.

QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

Plants and plant medicines are tied and related to land and place. For example, the terrain in the jungle in Pucallpa, Peru is quite different than it is in Cuzco. The energy, culture, land, soil, elevation, people and history are all different. As a result, there is a difference in sitting in ceremony in a place such as Pucallpa or Iquitos, where ayahuasca grows, than places it does not such as Russia, Chicago or France.

- Are there special rituals needed to welcome these plants outside of their natural geography?
- Is it disrespectful to the plant spirits to grow ayahuasca, for example, in a greenhouse in Iceland or places in Europe?
- How does the spirit of ayahuasca change when the components are grown in Hawaii and called ayahuasca? What is the difference energetically? Does it matter?
- If an indigenous tribe instructed researchers who were trying to make chemical versions of psilocybin, ayahuasca or ibogaine to stop altering the plant medicine, would they listen and stop production?

7. CRITIQUE OF THE MEDICAL MODEL OF UNDERSTANDING

While we are exploring how to be more aligned with plant medicines and their vision/s of healing, we must also look at the ways in which the Western medical model influences (overtly and covertly, directly and indirectly) the plant medicine community, and how this model, in many ways, is incompatible with the spirit of plant medicine work. It is analogous to force a square peg (plant medicine) into a round hole (Western medical and scientific traditions)—it is not really a fit. The push for acceptance within the Western medical model must be scrutinized, because the majority of the psychedelic research being done is steeped in Western models of science and scholarship. To add insult to injury, the Western medical/academic model tends to claim ownership, and therefore tries to frame and own the narrative around anything related to healing. This includes entitlement to be the arbiters of what is considered medically beneficial or harmful, what is “real” science or “folk”/“primitive” medicine (Western medicine often refers to anything non-Western as “folk medicine” or “primitive”), which

plant medicines can be legalized and which should remain illegal, which substances have “acceptable” medical uses and which do not, and so on. When we strictly adhere to a Western medical/quantitative model of understanding we cut off the qualitative, experiential, personally meaningful and deny the spiritual essence of plant medicines and the ways in which plant medicine work is sacred in nature.

Synthesizing and altering the plant medicines

Vine Deloria (2000) taught, “When I was much younger, I would bring Indian plant knowledge to scientists for them to investigate. But they always wanted to take the plant apart, break it down to see what its constituents were. Their efforts were pointless, because that’s not the way the medicine men use it. They use it whole, and then they get the natural product out of it by making a tea, or a poultice. You can’t chemically disassemble it, because it’s the whole of the plant that cures, not any one ingredient.”

As indigenous scholar Vine Deloria explains, one of the principle shortcomings in applying a Western medical approach to psychedelic medicine is that the Western approach often involves taking the plants out of their natural context, creating synthetic plant medicines and operating as if only certain parts of a plant are useful, while not seeing how the plant as a whole heals (again not applying an ecological view towards plant medicine work). Much of the research within the psychedelic community, especially funded research, tries to synthesize parts of the plant medicines without recognizing, as Deloria argues, that the plant in its whole form heals, that altering its natural state changes the healing process and fails to honor the spirit of the plant medicine. Specific examples include synthesizing Iboga to make ibogaine, synthesizing psilocybin away from the mushroom itself, creating synthetic versions of psilocybin in a laboratory, or studying DMT and acting as if that is the same as ayahuasca—while ignoring the difference in the effects of how the ayahuasca vine and chacruna plant work together. The indigenous approach works with plants in their natural state and does not alter the perfection of the plants; we should take a hard look at the potential negative implications of doing so.

Standardization

Another way in which the Western and the indigenous models are misaligned is that the Western medical model forces standardization of treatments and approaches, whereas the indigenous model is about tailoring the approach to the needs of the individual. The customization process found within the indigenous model not only starts with the working assumption that each individual is unique, and therefore needs their own healing approach, but also implies a trust in the plant medicines to offer guidance in terms of quantity of medicine and healing methods needed. The Western medical model, in contrast, is about forcing the healing process into bell curves, taking a one-size-fits-all approach, looking at average response times to consuming plant medicines and coming up with “optimal therapeutic dosages”, to name a few. For instance, within psilocybin studies every detail and protocol must be replicable including; a replicable music playlist, a standardized setting, predetermining a “standard dosage”, creating arbitrary rules regarding what the therapist/ researcher is allowed to say or not say to the person going through the experience. The standardization requirement moves plant medicine work away from a naturalistic model, done in naturalistic settings, with

indigenous healers (or those working within indigenous models), allowing non-standard dosages, unplanned healing music to occur, spontaneous prayer to emerge and each medicine experience to be unique.

Psychedelic research will continue to lose its soul and the deep connection to these beautiful plant medicines as it continues to move further away from its indigenous roots and indigenous methods of healing in favor of submitting itself to the Western medical model as a way to beg for approval from the big medical machine.

Furthermore, as we move towards standardization and pharmaceutical models, it begs the question if this type of standardization of approach is really how the plants are meant to be worked with?

The context and approach for the work are disconnected

I want to also challenge the idea that plant medicine work is best done by a psychotherapist or medical professional. While psychotherapy has wonderful healing applications, its own biases and philosophical constructs oftentimes run counter to an indigenous way of looking at, and working with, the plant medicines—including plant medicine integration. Western trained psychotherapists

and/or medical professionals are not taught to connect with spirit or plant medicines, nor to understand their language. Another area of incompatibility is the Western focus on individual healing versus the indigenous view that healing is collective in nature. For instance, in some situations, a group may gather to work with a plant medicine to help heal someone who is sick in their community and ask for the power of a particular plant medicine collectively, to help bring about the healing changes needed. However, the Western model and the Western philosophical approach are individualistic in nature. As a result, the focus of the psychedelic movement is on individual change and transformation versus community, collective or group-focused healing. We even see an individualist-focus in the underground, where the “solo” journey is mythologized and encouraged. The idea of working with plant medicines in a solo manner—like psychotherapy’s value of individuation and focusing on the needs of an individual over the collective, misses the opportunity to work with plant medicines in the ways they have been traditionally worked with to facilitate healing within a larger collective context. In my own research, I noted that ayahuasca ceremonies helped people move

from an individual-focus, or “survival of the fittest mentality”, towards a more relational and kinship focused orientation. If plant medicines help facilitate this type of change in people, then the focus of the work should also reflect this potential shift away from an individuation and individual orientation.

The Western plant medicine context is also off base in how plant medicine work is typically conducted indoors; sometimes in office settings and even in hospital settings (sometimes while having body function and vital signs monitored). The original plant medicine context was always plant medicine work being conducted in nature; with the natural sights and sounds, natural energies, spirits of the other plants, trees and even animals around to add to the experience. Requiring that these medicines be done in sterile settings again ignores the time-tested wisdom of the indigenous approach—which works with medicines in natural settings: outdoors or in open air structures, as part of an all-night ceremony or ritual with a view of the moonlight, while sitting on a mountain or even recreational use of plant medicines like psilocybin while hiking in the woods.

Subject/Object orientation

Within most indigenous approaches to plant medicine work, the leader/facilitator/healer will work with a plant medicine at the same time as the patient, or the person receiving the healing. In this way, the indigenous model is different from the subject/object view of Western medicine—whereby the “wise and all knowing” healer, therapist or doctor observes the patient and helps guide them through an experience without taking the same journey. In some ways, the Western medical model turns psychedelic work into a spectator sport, where the facilitator observes someone going through a challenging experience, while watching safely without ever having to go through any initiatory or challenging medicine experiences on their own. Furthermore, and equally troubling, many people trying to become psychedelic assisted therapists have very little personal experience with plant medicines, and yet think they “understand” how such plant medicines should work. Within more traditional medicine settings, folks apprentice for years, gain permission from mentors along with the plants themselves, before thinking they have the insight, experience and skill to be a facilitator. I am particularly troubled by those working with medicines such as ibogaine out of context or

those working with DMT and MDMA where the training and sometimes a “certification” can be done over a weekend. It is worth underscoring again, that nowhere in the training journey does the Western model ask whether or not the person wanting to become a medicine facilitator has consulted with the plant medicine or sought council and permission from an established medicine elder, before embarking on this journey.

Latin Names

Poet Adrienne Rich (1982) explains, “In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression...”. Rich points to the ways that words and the naming process itself are often undertaken as an act of colonization and domination; in that who controls the naming process also controls the way something is framed and understood. Indigenous peoples understand this inherent link between language and the naming process; how it frames the ways we relate to that which we give language to. The relationship that indigenous peoples have with place and land informs their language patterns and naming is often done in honor of the sacred connection between humans and the natural world. Respect and love for the natural world can be found in the way that many people who work with ayahuasca refer to the plant medicine

as “Grandmother.” A grandmother is an elder, a wise person, someone worthy of respect and caring. Referring to ayahuasca as a drug, as simply a vine or by its Latin name implies a different relationship to this medicine based on the terms used.

Requiring Latin names for plant medicines is another form of colonizing knowledge, creating Western standardization and generally part of the process of commodification. Western science dictates that anytime anyone in academia or the West writes about any plant medicines they automatically refer to the plant by its Latin name and not by its indigenous or original name. Ayahuasca vine is not the Latin “*banisteriopsis caapi*” nor is chacruna leaf “*psychotria viridis*”, san pedro cactus is not its Latin name “*echinopsis pachanoi*”, and peyote is not “*lophophora williamsii*”, nor is any other plant medicine its Latin name. These names are used by Western scientists as part of the rules of botanical nomenclature. The process of colonization applies in this case, as Western scientists assert power to impose an identity onto these plant medicines and in the process deny the indigenous peoples of naming their own medicines. Furthermore, I realize this may sound unusual, but in the scope of this essay it is worth asking

the question, do plants recognize someone who does not refer to them by their name or the name the people of their land have learned to call them. If we are assuming that plant communication is possible, and that plants have the capacity to communicate with us, we can then go one step further to assume that when we refer to the plants by names that are not theirs, that they do not recognize that we are communicating

with them. If we, for instance, referred to Taylor Swift as Dave Chappelle, she would not know who we were talking to. Perhaps this is the same with plants, and when we refer to them in ways that honor their name, they respond in kind. I wonder if referring to the plants in their native language could also affect their healing power and the experience of the person consuming them?

8. THE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW

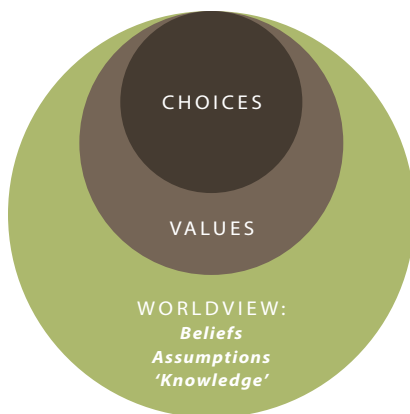
“Our worldview is not simply the way we look at our world. It reaches inward to constitute our innermost being, and outward to constitute the world. It mirrors but also reinforces and even forges the structures, armorings, and possibilities of our interior life. It deeply configures our psychic and somatic experience, the patterns of our sensing, knowing and interacting with the world. No less potently, our world view – our beliefs and theories, our maps, our metaphors, our myths, our interpretive assumptions – constellates our outer reality, shaping and working the world’s malleable potentials in a thousand ways of subtly reciprocal interaction. World views create worlds.”

—RICHARD TARNAS (2006)

I have argued throughout this essay that the psychedelic community needs to listen to the plants, and at the same time move itself from the trappings of dominant culture including the biases of Westernization, Western scientific traditions and its resultant Western medical model—all of which make up and influence the Western worldview.

Instead, I have shown that a movement towards an indigenous worldview and its assumptions, grounded within an Indigenous framework and agenda, is not only a better fit for the work of plant medicine because it implies and drives a different body of thought, behaviors, beliefs, and values, but also for the healing of all of our relations: humans, plants, animals, and natural world of this planet.

The following figure gives a good representational view of how our worldview includes our beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and how this ultimately affects our choices.



The indigenous scholar I first learned of this comparison between the indigenous and the Western worldview is Four Arrows. When I first read and thought deeply about this way of viewing Westernization and dominant culture, it helped me to see and understand that a shift towards the indigenous worldview was not only necessary for the survival of our planet, but must certainly be made within the plant medicine community and those working with psychedelics if we are to honor the plant medicines in a way that they want. The large body of work that Four Arrows has, and continues to produce, all focuses on examining and teaching about the indigenous worldview and its many applications. I would highly recommend his work to deepen one's understanding of the process of moving from one worldview to another. In particular his books: *Point of Departure: returning to our more authentic worldview for education and survival* (2016), *The Red Road* (Čhaŋkú Lúta): *Linking Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives to Indigenous Worldview* (2020), and his essay *A More Authentic Baseline* (2014)

As a point of clarification, the following chart contrasting the Indigenous worldview and the Western worldview

is included to understand the differences in a broad way, not to suggest that all Indigenous peoples believe the same thing. Nor am I suggesting that all Western people share the same worldview. The reason I am referring to an Indigenous worldview is to understand the differences as they pertain to Western/ dominant worldview. There certainly is fluidity based on a variety of factors, such as nature, nurture, culture, family and so on. An Indigenous person can adopt a Western worldview and orientation, and a Western person can certainly operate from an Indigenous worldview and orientation. These worldviews, and the inherent beliefs of each worldview, are not static; they are dynamic.

The following table is primarily based on the research found in Four Arrows and Narvaez (2014) titled, *A More Authentic Baseline*. I have modified this table so that it also reflects the influence of Four Arrows more recent work, along with the work of Vine Deloria and others. I have noted (FA) to refer to the work of Four Arrows and (D) to refer to the work of Vine Deloria when applicable, while (ME) refers to the work of Myron Eshowsky.

A COMPARISON OF THE WESTERN WORLDVIEW AND THE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW

VIEW	DOMINANT/WESTERN CULTURE	INDIGENOUS CULTURE
Relationship Within Nature	Humans at the top of the pyramid of significance.	Plants, animals, nature and humans are all seen as relatives.
The Healing Process	Healing is “me” focused and undertaken on an individual level.	Healing is done collectively, through group ritual, ceremony and sharing. Orientation; when I am healed the community is healed, when I am sick the community is sick.
Communication	Communication is strictly a human phenomenon.	Communication is possible with plants, animals and all of nature.
Principle of Highest Good (D)	Focused on what is best for human beings.	Based on ethical action for the natural world that includes human needs.
Medicine	Only allopathic medicine has validity. Human beings function like machines that can be dismantled and reduced into constituent parts.	All forms of healing are valid. The body, mind and spirit all work together and are inseparable in the healing process.
Spirit	Only humans have spirit.	Spirit pervades all things.
Science (D)	Reduces science to the smallest particle and separates knowledge (Cartesian and Newtonian orientation).	Indigenous science looks at relationships between things, takes an ecological and systems thinking approach.
Highest Knowledge (D)	Highest knowledge is the written word and scientific method.	Highest knowledge is lived experience as well as empirical trial and error.
Spiritual Energies (FA)	Disbelief in spiritual energies.	Recognition and honor of the spiritual energies in all things.
Rights/ Responsibilities (FA)	Emphasis on rights.	Emphasis on responsibilities.
The Greatest Good (D)	Individual liberty and human scale is focused on utilitarianism.	Respect for all, including ecosystem sustainability.

Continued...

A COMPARISON OF THE WESTERN WORLDVIEW AND THE INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW ... *Continued*

VIEW	DOMINANT / WESTERN CULTURE	INDIGENOUS CULTURE
Relationship to Place (D)	Has divorced itself from places, environments and living ecosystems, and has thus divorced itself from the ability to learn from places.	Highest good is connected to seasons, local environments and is always open to learning from place (places have power and are honored as such).
Individualism	Individual focused; highest good is responsible only to one's self or small family unit.	The basis of human development is derived from accepting responsibility as a member of a society, and therefore requires taking individual responsibility for the collective.
Role of Humans (D)	Humans are at the pinnacle.	Humans are the younger siblings.
Nature (FA)	Nature is dangerous.	Nature is benevolent.
Meaning (D)	Time is significant.	Places and geography as having meaning.
Role of Ceremony (FA)	Ceremony is owned by religion and done by rote.	Ceremony is life sustaining and part of living a good life.
Knowledge	Knowledge is demonstrated by reading, writing and test taking.	Knowledge is transferred through experiential learning, lived experience, introspection and inner knowledge.
Relationship with Nature	Detachment from nature, even fear of and non understanding.	Constant awareness and respect for all nonhumans as relatives and teachers (FA).
Theory and Action	Emphasis on theory and rhetoric versus action.	Inseparability between theory and action (FA).
Mysteries	Nothing is a mystery, everything can be solved with the rational mind.	Mysteries are respected and honored.

Let's continue this dialogue of how we as a community can dialogue with the plants and listen to what they want. Let's continue to honor what the plant medicines want and honor their power, wisdom and healing. Let's keep imagining if they were at the head of the boardroom what they might say to

us, how they might guide us, and how giving them a voice might change our actions, beliefs, and even inspire us to move towards a different worldview.

Please also feel free to dialogue with me directly: Roan@ayavolve.com

RECOMMENDED READING & RESOURCES

Smith, L.T. (1999). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*.

Four Arrows, (2016). *Point of Departure: returning to our more authentic worldview for education and survival*.

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