Ayahuasca in the Amazon
a father and daughter journey together

by Jack Lieberman • jackl@znet.com and Chloe Lieberman • chloevis@hotmail.com

As part of MAPS' effort to spark discussion on more balanced and effective drug education, we are publishing this story of a father and daughter's ayahuasca experience. For more on psychedelics as rites of passage, go to www.maps.org/ritesofpassage, and see the next special issue of the MAPS Bulletin on the theme of “kids and psychedelics.”

FATHER’S PERSPECTIVE

It can be a real dilemma for parents who have benefited greatly from plant medicines to know how to communicate about these experiences with their children. My 20-year-old daughter Chloe and I had the chance to participate in a ten-day experiential Ayahuasca Healing Seminar in the Brazilian Amazon this summer. This was my third seminar in this location. I went on a solo pilgrimage to the first seminar in July 2000, and my wife and I returned for the second one six months later. I returned this time because Chloe asked me if I would take her. The first two seminars were jointly led by Silvia Polivoy and Luis Eduardo Luna. This seminar, in July 2003, was led by Silvia alone.

Silvia is an Argentinian woman who is a licensed clinical psychologist practicing in Buenos Aires. She also has extensive shamanic training using various plant medicines. She first started giving ayahuasca to groups in Peru in 1997, and soon thereafter began her search for an appropriate place to hold a seminar in Brazil, where ayahuasca ceremonies are legal. Silvia found the perfect pousada, or inn, two hours outside of Manuas, Brazil. She was looking for a beautiful and comfortable place in the jungle, which was not too primitive. She felt that the ayahuasca experience could be difficult at times and depriving people of creature comforts in addition seemed like too much hardship for participants.

The pousada is very comfortable with safe water, electricity, air conditioning, a swimming pool and hot showers. Sleeping accommodations are simple but adequate cabin rooms with beds. Most rooms are doubles but some singles are available. Food is served buffet style and is quite good, even without salt. (A special diet of bland food without salt is followed during the seminar, along with a request for sexual abstinence.) The staff is extremely friendly and supportive of the participants. In fact, several of them participated in at least one ayahuasca session along with us.

The focus of Silvia's seminars is on healing, inner exploration, and personal growth. This was important to me in deciding to bring my daughter. I wanted her experience to be about something sacred, not just a "psychedelic trip," and I hoped that she would receive the deep insights that sometimes come during an ayahuasca journey. The seminar consists of four ayahuasca journeys, a time for group sharing the day after each journey, wonderful excursions into nature, art workshops, as well as talks by guest speakers. Future seminars will possibly include yoga, massage, and optional private sessions with Silvia for those participants who want to go deeper. All activities are completely voluntary.

Chloe and I ended a 17-hour flight from northern California and arrived in Manuas, a city located where the Rio Negro and the Rio Solimois flow together to form the Amazon. We had two days to familiarize ourselves with the new surroundings and get over the time difference before the start of the seminar. I wanted to show Chloe the market on the river in Manaus, which is modeled after the old Les Halles in Paris, and the decaying colonial architecture of the city. Two days later all fifteen participants and the seminar staff left for the two-hour trip into the jungle. We traveled by bus, ferry, and motorized canoe to our destination.

As I stepped onto the pousada dock I felt a quiver of inner familiarity rush through me. So many changes had happened to me there, so many miracles of personal transformation. It felt so right to bring my daughter to
experience the magic of ayahuasca healing. Although I felt some nervousness and fear about the upcoming journeys, I realized how much I had learned and how much my behavior had actually changed because of ayahuasca. From my prior experiences with her as group facilitator, I trusted Silvia completely to take care of my daughter and myself if necessary. The anxiety I felt was more like healthy respect for such a powerful plant teacher, one who I could not deceive and who always showed me the truth.

The leader of the seminar sets the tone for the entire event, and Silvia is the perfect facilitator. She has impeccable integrity which is vital for the person “holding the space” for a ceremony. One can sense her experience and skill in dealing with participants’ vulnerabilities and the occasional crisis that might arise. There is no ego involvement in her work; she is committed to the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of the plant medicine. She is also ultimately practical and takes care of all business at the seminar so that the participants are free of outside concerns and can fully explore their inner worlds.

There are few rules during the sessions, but they are important and Silvia makes sure they are followed. No one is allowed to leave the building where the sessions take place. Each participant has his or her own mattress and is expected to stay alone for the duration of the session, except of course if help is needed. Interaction among the participants during the session is not permitted. Excessive noise is gently discouraged. The ayahuasca session is clearly a time for an inward journey and it is suggested that participants keep their eyes closed even though the room is very dark. The session is not in any sense a party or a place to have a good time; it is a time to be with oneself and learn from the plants. Silvia’s choices of recorded music and sometimes just the sounds of the jungle provide an important background for the sessions.

What is the ayahuasca experience like? Each person has his or her own flavor of experience, therefore I can only accurately write about my own. I often feel an intelligent female presence acting as a life teacher. I have no vision of a form for this intelligence—perhaps it is part of my own unconscious or really some spirit being. Whatever it is, it seems to know everything about me and lovingly acts as a kind of divine therapist—not so much by talking to me as by giving me actual experiences that point out ways that I can live my life more skillfully and actually change my behavior to solve specific problems.

One such experience during this summer’s seminar had to do with my relationship with Chloe. For the first two days of our trip to South America, things were somewhat tense between us. Although Chloe and I have a good relationship, being with a family member for 24 hours a day can be challenging. During the first ayahuasca journey, I understood clearly what this tension was about. I had an experience of what it feels like to be the object of someone else’s attempt to control me, and it did not feel very good. I realized that on some kind of psychic level I was in the habit of trying to control my daughter. This wasn’t a malevolent control, I wanted to protect her and shape her environment—which was very appropriate when she was a small child and totally inappropriate now at age 20. I promised myself at that moment that I would stop
trying to control Chloe and trust her with her own life. I shared this insight with her after the session and she acknowledged that she felt my attempt to control her and welcomed my promise to stop. I felt free of this unconscious need to control her life and our relationship took a healthy leap forward. This is an example of how ayahuasca works as a therapist for me. It doesn’t just talk to me, it provides an experience that brings great insight. I have found that experience, rather than just words, is a powerful incentive for change.

My ayahuasca journeys are much more than practical lessons leading to insights and changes in behavior. The more I work with this medicine, the more experiences I have of the divine. Poets have for centuries tried to describe this in words, and religions preach about having faith in God or some divine energy. There is nothing like an actual experience of divine presence to wake me up to the fact that I am not in control of very much that happens to me. I have been struggling with a compulsion to control things for my entire 58 years. During an ayahuasca journey it became clear to me that this need to control comes from a lack of faith in the cosmic plan. It comes from fear and the desire for self-protection from huge forces that are beyond my control. During one of my journeys I actually started laughing when I saw the futility of attempting to control my environment and my circumstances. After one session I realized what I often do in life: I build huge sand dikes on a beach hoping to keep the tide back. What a waste of energy! After experiences like these, it is much easier to short circuit my tendency to control, by recognizing this destructive pattern when it begins.

The plant teacher “spoke” to me during a journey after I asked about how to handle fear. She said that the antidote to fear was faith and trust in the cosmic drama taking place around me. Having faith does not come easily for me. However, if I can see this cosmic drama taking place, it is so much easier to trust in the flow of the great river of the cosmos. It is absolutely clear that there is no other alternative.

Another very important teaching I received from the plant concerned an addiction I have to thinking. I have been plagued by over-thinking most of my life, but until this recent journey I never framed it as an “addiction to thinking.” The ayahuasca presence “spoke” to me about this addiction and suggested tactics to use to deal with it. I was given the experience of how over-thinking feels, how debilitating it is, and that its first symptom is worry. By simply labeling worry as a symptom of an addiction that I want to be rid of, I have been able to make progress in not falling into what is essentially a bad habit.

Silvia’s seminar provided the perfect environment to introduce my daughter to something that has been so important to me. Experiencing ayahuasca together in a safe, supportive and legal setting was a very special and unforgettable experience for both of us. I feel that the seminar was a tremendous success for father and daughter. I would recommend these Ayahuasca Healing Seminars to anyone seriously committed to self-exploration and inner transformation.

**DAUGHTER’S PERSPECTIVE**

My dad gave me a trip into my consciousness as a twentieth birthday present. He had already attended Ayahuasca Healing Seminars in the Brazilian Amazon two times, and he decided to share the experience with me. He felt that it would be a unique and valuable opportunity for us. While some people are disturbed or confused by the idea of parents giving their children mind-altering substances, I have never doubted the correctness of the choice my dad made to introduce me to his most praised teacher.

Throughout my life, my parents have been open and honest about their therapeutic use of entheogens. They have initiated conversations with me about consciousness exploration, and have always been available for questions
and feedback. I had their stories and advice in mind as I began my own experimentation, and I maintained respect and reverence for drugs. Consciousness-expanding substances have provided them with guidance, humility, wisdom, and bliss, and I understand that those were the things my dad wanted to share with me when he offered me the opportunity to attend the Ayahuasca Healing Seminar with him.

While we have shared stories of our individual experiences with each other, until last July I had not entered a psychedelic mind state with either of my parents. My dad and I were both excited and a little nervous moving closer to the mysteries of the jungle and ayahuasca. When we arrived at the seminar, my nervousness turned into curiosity and excitement.

The location, about an hour and a half outside of Manaus on the banks of the Rio Ariau, is mind-blowing on its own. The pousada where we stayed was simple and comfortable with double occupancy rooms and private bathrooms. Along with the facilitator and speakers, the fifteen seminar participants ate a salt-free, wholesome shaman’s diet together in a dining room overlooking the river and the awesome jungle. We were there for ten days and drank ayahuasca every other night in a womblike cosmic spaceship made of palm leaves and native woods (that during the rest of the year doubles as a game room). The days after the ceremonies were spent resting, creating artwork, and sharing our journeys with one another. On the other days we explored the jungle with a warm, intelligent native guide and could attend presentations given by the various guest speakers. Throughout the seminar there was a lot of communication among the participants that forged a strong bond between us, and allowed me to really develop my interpretation of the completely overwhelming ayahuasca experience.

For me, the seminar was a transcendent mingling of historic, contemporary, and futuristic worlds. It created a context in which an ancient medicine could be used by non-indigenous people in a way that was not separate or alien from our lives in the current world. The nature of the sacrament induces a feeling of unification with the human experience across the ages, and the power of the jungle reminded me of geologic time and the newness of the human species. The basic themes of the seminar—healing, growth, connection with divinity, and self-discovery—as well as the ceremonial atmosphere we created, respectfully connected us with the ancient use of the plant. Building on this traditional basis, the discussions we had as a group, the structure of the ceremony, and the lectures and activities provided were decidedly modern. We discussed astrophysics, the Internet, relativ-
vibrating through my body as I shakily walked out onto the mosaic steps toward our room. I felt a little dizzy and very light as my consciousness completed its return into my body.

The night before I had thrown up within an hour of drinking the brew—following about forty seconds of falling through a multidimensional fractal world that was the most overpowering psychedelic experience I have had. After throwing up so early (the other nights I threw up at least a few hours after drinking the brew), I felt the ayahuasca much more subtly for the rest of the session. I had few optical visions and did not journey anywhere physical, but instead was right there, in the circular ceremony building with only mosquito netting separating me from the jungle. I felt incredibly connected with the group and with Mother Earth, and was cradled by something that felt like God.

When I walked into our room in the morning, my dad got up from his bed and without taking the blinders off of his eyes he hugged me. After hugging and expressing our love for each other we lay down in our beds and recounted our experiences. I found it important to share with my dad in the early mornings at the very ends of our journeys. Communicating helped to organize and make sense of the knowledge that had been given to me; painting, being with the rainforest, and doing yoga helped me to retain the non-intellectual elements of the experience.

Both my dad and I mentioned an overwhelming feeling of unity among the group the previous night. Very few people had thrown up, and there were no sounds of pain or struggle; the session had started off with one participant singing and joyfully chattering. My dad looked at me with clear, sparkling eyes and said, “I feel like there’s no more to learn.” I laughed.

“I know, it’s just love.” And I felt certain of that.

He smiled and said, “I felt like I was going to explode with love for you. It was actually painful.” We discussed a mutual encounter with what appeared to be the ultimate source, something that we could incorporate into our lives as unquestionable truth. The ayahuasca had chosen to saturate our group in divine universal love.

I think that part of what enabled my dad and me to access this source was our familial love and fondness for each other. We are good friends and enjoy one another, and we have one of the most primal love relationships in nature. This natural love was magnified by the fusion of very positive energies in our group, and energized by the facilitator, Silvia Polivoy, and guest instructor Pablo Amaringo, a Peruvian ex-shaman and artist.

Drinking ayahuasca was like getting glasses after years of not knowing that my vision wasn’t complete. The spiritual and psychic expansion that took place in the jungle was not just a glimpse or a temporary revelation, but a clear message from the divine. Truth is love, and if I trust the truth it will help me float above myself to a place where the right direction is everywhere. I don’t think that using ayahuasca is the only way that I could have accessed this knowledge, but I don’t know if I would have had the faith and discipline to find it through other means.

I feel as though I have been initiated into some universal covenant of transparent reality and cosmic understanding. Since returning from my ayahuasca journeys I have not felt any overwhelming distress. I have been sad, and struggled through difficult situations, and felt fear and anger and frustration, but have been able to look through those mental functions and experience the calm oneness of love. Along with the fundamental message of love, the ayahuasca shared with me many more personal, practical insights. I chose to open myself to them, to trust my dad, the universe, and myself. And, I now consciously choose to apply what I have been shown in every moment.

I feel incredibly grateful to my mom and dad. They both broke away from dogmatic religious backgrounds seeking personal spiritual truth, and they have the love, trust, and respect for me as an adult to share one of the most valuable spiritual tools they have found.

I don’t think of ayahuasca itself, the Ayahuasca Healing Seminar, or any entheogenic experience as a miracle cure or ultimate spiritual practice. Ayahuasca is a tool, and the Ayahuasca Healing Seminar a safe and guided opportunity to learn how to use that tool to its full potential. To live in a mindful, honest way is a choice, and many tools exist that can help us do this with less fear and more love. Entheogens are unique in that they temporarily quiet the mind and highlight the higher levels of consciousness that are difficult to access in our daily lives. I hope that my words will encourage parents and children to open their minds to the healing potential of these incredible plants. Every young person will encounter drugs, and parents have the opportunity to shape the nature of that encounter to help their children experience some of their benefits, while learning respect and humility for their remarkable power.

For more information about the Ayahuasca Healing Retreats described in this account, see www.ayahuasca-healing.net. For more about the MAPS Rites of Passage Project, which compiles and shares stories such as the one above, see www.maps.org/ritesofpassage.