Sandwiched between Vancouver’s Amsterdam Café and the Blunt Brothers Café, the B.C. Marijuana Party Bookstore is the official headquarters for the political organization founded by self-declared Prince of Pot, Marc Emery. Emery’s gray-market empire was built on his Cannabis seed business, and the store—located on the marijuana tourism block of Hastings Street in downtown Vancouver—sells seeds, books, and smoking accessories. Emery’s Internet-broadcast network, Pot-TV (www.pot-tv.net), hosted a convergence of entheogen enthusiasts from Canada and beyond. Attendees gathered in the bookstore’s basement to share ideas about the application of these substances in spiritual, religious, and therapeutic contexts, on January 31 and February 1, 2004. (A few months later, on April 25, a suspicious fire ravaged the block, destroying several businesses and temporarily closing Emery’s bookstore and seed shop. They are now again open for business.)

Entheogenesis was the word created for the occasion. Carl Ruck, PhD—one of the folks who coined the term entheogen—defined this new word-spin as “experiencing divine inspiration from the use of [psychoactive] plants.” The term seems to reflect the tastes of those who choose to use the word entheogen—literally translated as something that “generates God within.” The tone of those gathered was decidedly spiritual, and many in attendance seemed partial to plant teachers over synthetics. Cannabis, mushrooms, ayahuasca, and peyote were all popular topics of conversation.

Editor of the Journal of Cannabis Therapeutics, Dr. Ethan Russo presented two lectures, the first of which, “Bhang, Ganja, and Charas: Ancient Cannabis Claims and their Scientific Rationale,” opened the conference. Russo’s impressively-detailed presentation verified the folkloric therapeutic uses of marijuana with modern-day research. Shortly after Russo’s presentation, several conference attendees, including myself, were incapacitated from the thick cloud of marijuana smoke that had settled in the room. While we were recovering upstairs, conference organizer and Pot-TV manager Chris Bennett explained Cannabis references in the Bible to the select group of people who had passed the test of marijuana tolerance.

In our red-eyed, contact-high mind states, a friend and I journeyed outside of the basement, browsed the legal entheobotanicals for sale in the Urban Shaman, and ventured out along Hastings Street to explore a beautiful yet poverty-stricken urban setting—Vancouver’s downtown east side. As my companion that this area has extraordinarily high rates of addiction, prostitution, and crime, we passed a man in a wheelchair preparing a syringe, then maneuvered between two cops in conversation on one half of the sidewalk, and two people not-so-clandestinely conducting a drug deal on the other. Further still, we came upon the modest storefront of Insite, a newly-opened clinic that provides IV drug users with clean needles and a safe place to use them.

In this setting of hard drug use and liberal harm reduction responses, an exploration of entheogens was hardly controversial. Back inside, Buddhist scholar Mike Crowley’s presentation, “The Secret Drugs of Buddhism” explored the possibility that psychedelic mushrooms may have been soma, the ancient drug-god of the East. Ruck and Blaise Staples, PhD referenced fungi again when they traced similarities of Christianity and Mithraism, and the entheogenic (possibly mushroom-based) roots of Christianity.

One of Marc Emery’s many projects is the Iboga Therapy House (www.ibogatherapy.org). Sandra Karpetas, director of this clinic (which uses a compound isolated from the West African shrub Tabernanthe iboga in the treatment of drug addiction), spoke eloquently about this project. In the coming months, I will be working with Sandra and the Iboga
Therapy House, as well as Randy Hencken from the Ibogaine Association clinic in Mexico, to conduct a MAPS-funded outcome study on the efficacy of ibogaine-assisted therapy in treating substance addiction (see page 7).

MAPS’ president, Rick Doblin, PhD, outlined MAPS’ strategy and goals as a non-profit pharmaceutical company, explaining why FDA-approved research is our chosen route for making these drugs available for beneficial use. As regulatory agencies begin to approve the studies which MAPS has been advancing, we move toward what Rick called “a contingency plan in case of success;” that is, the actual strategies involved in developing these drugs into prescription medicines.

Jon Hanna, author and organizer of the Mind States conferences (www.mindstates.org), visually and aurally-stimulated the audience with a slideshow of contemporary psychedelic art from the past 40 years, titled “Psychedelics, Altered Consciousness, and Visionary Art.” The slides were accompanied by an explanation of common symbols and themes in psychedelic art, ambient music, and a convincing Terence McKenna impression.

Filmmaker and parapsychologist Jean Millay, PhD, presented a 1965 peyote-inspired film she co-created with Allen Willis, *The Psychedelic Experience*. The abstract imagery, accompanied by the voices of Tim Leary and Ralph Metzner, set the tone for her talk. Describing personal accounts of psi (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis), parties with the Grateful Dead, and other early explorations with LSD, she painted the audience a picture of the days before LSD prohibition.

Perhaps one of the most dynamic speakers was saved for last. Attorney David Aaron, a Canadian version of cognitive liberty advocate Richard Glen Boire, presented a mock trial in which he painstakingly outlined the defense of a mushroom user based on the Canadian constitution, civil liberties, and ideas borrowed from Boire, Rick Doblin, and Terence McKenna.

While the atmosphere was generally engaging and intentional, the conference could have benefited from a larger space and better ventilation. The cavalier and on-stage use of psychedelic drugs—political theater disguised as psychedelic experimentation—seemed to violate every rule I know about set and setting. It did, however, illustrate how far this might go without generating a police counterattack under the protection of Emery’s empire: very far. After two days of intellectually and experientially exploring the spiritual import of God-manifesting substances, we emerged from the Marijuana Party Bookstore back into the downtown east side, known by some residents as “hell.” The contrast—between heaven and hell—was sharp.

Transpersonal psychologists Stanislav and Christina Grof have pointed out that drug dependency, for many people, is a form of spiritual emergency. The journey of the addict to the bottom and back up into recovery is often an ego death-and-rebirth process. While from the surface these worlds look quite different, I realized that the meth, heroin, and crack addicts of the downtown east side and the entheogen-using spiritual seekers are, in some ways, on the same quest for wholeness. In the midst of an inner city in spiritual crisis, people are open to creating new and less harmful cultural models for seeking spirituality and meaning. Likewise, the liberal harm reduction policies and low penalties for casual drug use that made open exploration of entheogens possible at Entheogenesis exist in response to the failures of prohibition that are evident just outside. A visit to Vancouver and this conference showed the interconnection of the highs and lows of human experience. It also offered the hope that, personally and politically, the most troubled times are often those that open us to new possibilities and greater healing.

Video of all of the presentations from the Entheogenesis conference is available at www.pot-tv.net. Also see www.entheogenesis.ca.