Psychedelics have a remarkable effect on the therapeutic relationship and the process of psychotherapy. The use of psychedelics in a therapy relationship can allow for a deep amplification of essential elements in the therapy process. This is especially so in a brief intense intervention, one that is designed to alleviate fear, anxiety, and loss of meaning at the end of a life.

People faced with their own death are confronted with the last great mystery of life. What lays beyond this world is unknown and so, shrouded it remains. We have accounts of near-death experiences, and the statements of various religions concerning the afterworld, but no certainty.

The hopes, yearnings, and despairs of the patient nearing death, and their loved ones, are projected on this screen of unknowing. A psychedelic experience can provide a glimpse into the process of death, an opportunity to experience a preview of what it is like to surrender the hard-won image of oneself to the unknown. This ego death, or transcendence, is a central axis of the relief that can be provided by psychedelic drugs in a properly managed milieu.

Ego death can be physically powerful and include physical symptoms such as weak pulse and breathlessness, or it can be more eidetic, involving the extreme modification of the usual sense of self. Or it can be more symbolic and integrative. In this regard, I recall the peak experience of my first psychedelic psychotherapy patient. (Patients discussed in this article have fictitious names to shield their true identities.) Joe was a labor union leader.

Joe called us (therapist and co-therapist) over to the couch. He held our hands. He spoke of being a child, of the difficulties he experienced being poor, of the joys of his profound identification with his father and the struggle that was his father’s. Joe said he was experiencing that his father’s struggle was also his own, and at the same time it was the struggle of all
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Psychedelic medicines are powerful tools that require proper training of therapists for the most effective psychotherapy outcomes to be realized. The nature of training is multidimensional because, in my opinion, it must include a personal psychotherapy occurring within a series of psychedelic sessions for the trainee. The deep experience of psychedelic states, and the effective understanding of one’s own psychodynamics on a personal and transpersonal dimension, is essential for the safe, effective and responsible use of these drugs. A capacity for personal surrender to the effects of psychedelics, including ego-death, is a prerequisite for any effective psychedelic therapist.

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The Drug War has created such a repressive political atmosphere that proper training has been eliminated. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of this repression is the loss of lineage: There is no way for mature psychedelic therapists to legally train new therapists in the ego-surrendering processes. A generation of experienced therapists is about to be lost. The Maryland Psychiatric Research Center was the last facility that had financial support and political permission to train its therapists this way. Unfortunately the MPRC closed its doors to psychedelic research in 1977. It is a good thing that MAPS is working toward permission to administer psychedelic training sessions. One can only hope that a mechanism can be found to allow mature therapists, trained as outlined above, to begin the process of passing on their knowledge experientially through training sessions.

How can a psychotherapist have something to offer the dying? It is only the therapist who has lived deep recapitulation of their early years, and a convincing death of their cherished concept of themselves, who can offer solid guidance to a patient in a deep psychedelic session. Through this kind of training a therapist faces death, through the caring assistance of a mentor who has experienced the same depths. By undergoing a convincing personal experience of death “ahead of time” the therapist gains the personal experience necessary to provide compassionate support so patients can fully face the ultimate mystery.