Psychedelics and Circus Arts: Creating Community with the New Old Time Chautauqua

By Rose Grey

It’s an average day at the grocery store until you hear the sound of a big brass marching band. A parade of merrymakers with colorful banners, dancing children, hula hoopers, jugglers, acrobats, and people on stilts gallivants down Main Street and into the store.

The entire experience has been concocted by the New Old Time Chautauqua, a troupe of about 60 entertainers, educators, cooks, stagehands, truck drivers, and musicians that puts on free shows and workshops over 3-4 week tours in a different region of the Pacific Northwest every summer. Now in its 31st year, Chautauqua encourages us all to take a break from our “To Do” lists and join the parade, remembering for a time that life is short, precious, and full of surprises.

This modern mobile artistic celebration was born from an annual fair in Oregon where many attendees choose to use psychedelics. The fair describes itself as a place for psycho-spiritual rejuvenation and is intended to create experiences that nourish the soul and enliven the spirit. The use of psychedelics allowed early fairgoers the creative freedom to think outside the box, and to dream up and carry out a fantastical vision, one which may otherwise have felt impossible.

Our ancient ancestors and people of many cultures across the world have long gathered around fires to sing and dance, producing a heightened awareness of love and appreciation. Creating these kinds of experiences is central to the mission of modern-day performance troupes like the New Old Time Chautauqua, as they bust through the doors of hospitals, detention centers, and retirement homes with refreshing rays of color, sound, and spirit.

A good show inspires the audience with a sense of unity among themselves, between themselves and the divine, and even within themselves. Although it varies greatly and is difficult to define, this feeling also characterizes the psychedelic experience. Whether brought on by actually ingesting a psychedelic drug or by other intense moments such as loss of a loved one, drastic physical or emotional changes, or falling in love with someone new, these transformations empower great art. Many of our culture’s most popular songs or most remembered photographs speak to these times in our lives.

Today, the New Old Time Chautauqua is fostering community in the everyday world, with professional entertainers making their living through dedicated practice and organized business methods. With shows in big theaters, high school gyms, local parks, and school cafeterias and workshops in everything from gardening to unicycling (even discussion workshops on scientific and intellectual topics) Chautauqua is bringing the spirit of community and compassion to the modern imagination. In its waves of rejuvenation, we find hope and a reason to feel good.