

The Rite of Passage: A family's perspective on the use of **MDMA**

Father's story

in

THE MID-1980S, my daughter Eve asked me and her mother Sarah if she could be given a therapeutic dose of MDMA. At the

In the mid-1980s,
my daughter Eve
asked me and
her mother Sarah
if she could be given
a therapeutic dose
of MDMA.

time, she was 16 years old and the drug was still legal. Eve thought it might help her resolve a persistent, growing fear that her parents might suddenly die and leave her orphaned. It seemed to me then that this fear was a manifestation of something else which troubles many adolescents at about her age: awareness that her childhood was coming to an end. What Eve really found so frightening was knowing that soon she would leave her parents' home and face the challenge of living the life of a free individual "out there," in the great world. From her vantage as a pampered only child, this must have seemed daunting indeed. By "pampered" I do not mean spoiled; I mean that Eve had been raised in an environment of demonstrated love, mutual respect and dependable fairness. She was starting to realize that she could not expect to be treated as well by the larger society.

When Eve approached us to ask if we thought it might help her to take MDMA I did not answer "yes" immediately. I had taken psychedelics many times since my first experience in the late 1960s when, at the age of 19, I ingested a very strong dose of LSD. For me that had been a life-changing event which eventually led me to graduate studies at one of the major divinity schools in the United States.

I also knew that psychedelic substances are safe for most people to use if care is taken to ensure proper dosage, set and setting. My own use of psychedelics had not caused me to crave other drugs which I consider far more dangerous, such as heroin and cocaine, or even those which I consider more benign, such as marijuana. But I wanted to review the current literature on MDMA's alleged adverse effects before giving my daughter permission to take it. After several days I agreed, as did her mother. What tipped the scale was our personal conviction that the insights to be gained from a responsibly conducted MDMA session far outweighed any possible risk of lasting harm.

The setting we chose was an island in the Great Lakes where Eve, Sarah and I had often camped on our vacations. We pitched our tent near the shore of an isolated bay which faced the sunset. The season was summer. What happened next is described in the following paragraphs, loosely adapted from a letter I wrote a few weeks later to a friend of mine.

The dose Eve took was about 125 mg—normal for me and Sarah but a little bit strong, it turned out, for a person of Eve's size who had never before experienced a psychedelic substance. The result was that Eve's experience appeared, to myself as an outside observer, to be almost equal in intensity to a full-blown

psychedelic trip. But no harm was done. On the contrary, Eve was able to resolve a lot of problems that were plaguing her, especially a fear that those she loved might die suddenly and be lost to her. She realized that those she loves become a real part of her. It was an obviously liberating thing for her to realize.

When she took it, we were sitting at a picnic table underneath some birch and fir trees. It was about an hour before sunset. Partly cloudy but predominantly clear blue sky. Then, before she felt the effects, we went down to the beach and Sarah started a fire. Eve sat on a huge piece of driftwood near the fire, facing the western horizon of the lake. This area is unspoiled and remote—no pollution or distractions, only seagulls for company most of the time.

Attention! Attention!

Suddenly, Eve began to stare fixedly into the fire and said: "I'm feeling really, really strange." We asked her if the feeling was bad. "No," she said emphatically, "just strange." I then suggested that she take a long walk down the beach, which I had found very enjoyable when I had taken MDMA a few months earlier while camping in the same area. But Eve preferred to stay put. About 20 minutes later, when she tried to stand and walk a bit, she found that her body just wouldn't cooperate. Her legs were rubber. When we finally went for a walk an hour later, she had to lean on me in order to stay upright.

Throughout these experiences, Eve voiced a steady stream of revelations, all positive. Among them: "The world's incredibly beautiful. It's like this all the time but we don't see it and appreciate it." "Old Eve wouldn't let me lose control like this. But all I was doing was keeping myself from experiencing life." "Death's a part of life. It shouldn't be something we worry about all the time. What really matters is to really appreciate being alive." And a quote, among her favorites, from Aldous Huxley's novel *Island*: "Attention! Attention!"

I was somewhat surprised that Eve did not contemplate and marvel at the sunset as much as I had during my MDMA session a few months earlier, or even as much as she normally does in her ordinary state of consciousness. However, nightfall brought an incredibly clear, starry sky, and she loved it. I will always remember how loving and close it felt to stand with her there on the beach, in the darkness a few hundred feet from the fire, looking up together. "Wow," Eve said in a whispery voice, "the stars are raining down on me." Which made them rain down on me, too. Looking back on the experience over the

next few days, Eve said it was very constructive for her and not negative at all. She overcame a few compulsions (for instance, an obstinate refusal to drink from the same glass or bottle that someone else had drunk from), acquired a healthier attitude toward death and in general took a big step toward independence and enlightenment. As you can probably imagine, I was forced by all this to become more independent and enlightened myself, breaking free of my conditioned, conservative father role and acting on convictions I acquired only after leaving my own childhood home.

Eve had been raised in an environment of demonstrated love,

Eve would no doubt report that I remained a conservative father, for example by enforcing a fairly strict curfew and by warning her against the usual list of bad influences. I needn't have worried; she handled herself just fine, avoiding such temptations as excessive use of alcohol and drugs at school. Apparently the fact that she could openly discuss these things at home made her better informed to make responsible decisions, and one of the decisions that she made was not to get high. By the time she finished high school she was ready to enter the world and explore it with growing self-confidence. Her graduation present from Sarah and me was a week-long workshop with Stan and Christina Grof at Esalen, which required that she make her first cross-country flight alone. Since then her travels have taken her as far as to Delphi in Greece, volcanic islands off the southern coast of Italy and Albert Hofmann's home in Switzerland. And recently, she married a young man who seems an extremely good match for Eve's exceptional courage, creativity and character. I would like to think that she would recognize herself in the following passage from a lecture e.e. cummings gave at Harvard:

As it was my miraculous fortune to have a true father and a true mother, and a home which the truth of their love made joyous, so—in reaching outward from this love and this joy—I was marvelously lucky to touch and seize a rising and striving world; a reckless world, filled with the curiosity of life itself; a vivid and violent world welcoming every challenge; a world worth hating

mutual respect and

dependable fairness.

She was starting to realize

that she could not expect

to be treated as well

by the larger society.

and adoring and fighting and forgiving: in brief, a world which was a world. This inwardly immortal world of my adolescence recoils to its very roots whenever, nowadays, I see people who've been endowed with legs crawling on their chins after quote security unquote. 'Security?' I marvel to myself 'what is that?' Something negative, undead, suspicious and suspecting; an avarice and an avoidance; a self-surrendering meanness of withdrawal; a numerable complacency and an innumerable cowardice. Who would be 'secure'? Every and any slave. No free spirit ever dreamed of 'security'—or, if he did, he laughed; and lived to shame his dream. No whole sinless sinful sleeping waking breathing human creature ever was (or could be) bought by, and sold for, 'security.' How monstrous and how feeble seems some unworld which would rather have its too than eat its cake!

In my opinion Eve had her cake and ate it too the day that she freely decided to embrace the insecurities of life at age 16. I will never regret having helped her undergo that rite of passage.

What tipped the scale was our personal conviction that the

insights to be gained from a responsibly conducted MDMA

session far outweighed any possible risk of lasting harm.

Mother's story (Sarah)

I HAVE BEEN WORKING in the US health care system for over twenty years and have acquired a multifaceted appreciation for drugs, their effects (possible, probable and actual) and their legal and social ramifications. My experience with psychedelics started when I was in my early 20s during the early 70s. I was fortunate to have experienced the effects of psychedelics in a community of people who explored these substances with care and respect. I was also fortunate to have my daughter Eve, who

influenced me to embrace the innocence and wonder in the world. Her influence was especially strengthening when I took psychedelics in her presence. This occurred when she was in her first to fifth year of age. However, she was never given psychedelics. The strong, loving community we were a part of also benefited from Eve's influence, and we enjoyed playing with her and her toys and sharing her perspective on the world.

Without the help of psychedelics and Eve's influence, I sincerely doubt that I would have been able to transcend the dysfunctional behaviors I had acquired from growing up with alcoholic and bipolar disordered family members.

When Eve was five years old it was necessary to move away from our psychedelic community and she entered into the public school system. This, along with the influence of the upscale political/governmental persecution of psychedelic use, forced my husband and I to no longer feel that it was wise or safe to allow Eve to be present when we used psychedelics and we always represented our psychedelic use as a part of past experiences. We did, however, discuss psychedelics openly in our household. Because of our own healing experiences with psychedelics and our interest in psychology, we were involved in the scholarly study and investigation of psychedelics as healing tools.

Our right and duty to teach

Eve started to ask about psychedelics when she was 15 years old. My husband and I felt we were faced with a real dilemma because we believed psychedelics could be beneficial, but we didn't want to expose ourselves or our daughter to possible legal prosecution. After a lot of soul-searching we realized that it was not only our right but also our duty to teach her how to use them appropriately. Because we were no longer part of an actual psychedelic community we decided to consult the virtual psychedelic community embodied in literature to assist us in Eve's educational process. Books given to Eve to read included: *The Doors of Perception*, *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, *Island* and *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*. We then discussed with her what she had read, emphasizing the importance of set and setting and ceremony and the political climate at the time (mid-80s).

At the age of 16, Eve asked to be given the sacrament. Though physically healthy she was clearly having problems adjusting to her role as an adolescent. She had become very introverted and untrusting of her peers. She also had developed a phobia about what she called "backwash" (drinking from a container someone else had drunk from). The decision to use MDMA was based on a number of factors. First, it was not illegal at the time. Second, it offered a mild psychedelic experience that would be relatively short-lived. Most importantly, we hoped that it would help Eve reconnect with the world and give her a perspective on the transition she needed to make. We addressed the legal issue by insisting that Eve not reveal her experience to anyone but friends who were respectful of psychedelics.

THE CEREMONY took place in September, on an island in the Great Lakes from which only other islands can be seen from the western shoreline where we held the ceremony. The day of the ceremony was spent in preparation. I made a firepit on the beach and filled it with wood so Eve could enjoy the warmth and beauty of a campfire during her experience. The sacrament was given to her in a field above the beach as the sun was just beginning to set. Neither my husband nor I took a psychedelic during Eve's session; both of us served as her sitters.

The sacrament proved to be a powerful experience for all of us. Since Eve had never experienced intoxication of any kind in the past, she had no reference to the altered physical function she experienced. She therefore had difficulty walking and moving in a coordinated fashion. She had been warned about jaw tension so she did not react adversely to the sensation of jaw tightness associated with using MDMA. We sat on the beach and watched a beautiful sunset. We were then blessed with a moonless, clear, star-filled sky and the warmth and beauty of the campfire. Eve was especially affected by the stars and proclaimed that she felt part of the universe. She realized that she had been struggling with separation anxiety—not wanting ever to be separated from her mother and father. With the help of the sacrament she was able to understand that she would always be a part of us and that we would always be a part of her no matter the "distance" between us. This experience forged an even stronger bond between us. From that point on, Eve knew that

she could proceed with her development, feeling assured that she would always have her parents for support and guidance and that the universe had the potential to hold and nourish her. The backwash phobia also abated.

Ten years later

Reflecting on the experience ten years later I realize that Eve was given back what she had given me when I was in my twenties, a deep appreciation for the wonder of life and the world. She has grown up to be a spirited, loving and courageous person who has always used psychedelics with care and respect and moderation. I have the strong conviction that Eve's MDMA experience helped her to be the person she is today. It allowed her to find balance and perspective in her life when she was stuck and taught her respect for the healing potential of psychedelics that she has never forgotten. Eve's life could have turned out quite differently, I think, if my husband and I had not accepted our duty to teach her how to use psychedelics in a sacred way. I offer this testimony to help parents who are facing the same dilemma as my

Eve's life could have turned out quite differently, I think,

if my husband and I had not accepted our duty to teach her

how to use psychedelics in a sacred way.

husband and I did with Eve. I strongly encourage parents who know how to use psychedelics in a sacred way to teach their children how to do so. Despite the threat of legal ramifications taken on by such an undertaking, I think the risk of an adolescent learning how to use them incorrectly from misinformed or reckless peers is far more dangerous. I regret that because of the present political climate this account must be written anonymously. I only hope the day will come when parents can legally give their adolescent children an essential life experience: the rite of passage.

Daughter's story (Eve)

I CANNOT DESCRIBE my first experience with a psychedelic drug, which was provided for me by my parents, without first discussing my general attitude towards drugs. My views were strongly influenced by my parents. I was raised to view all drugs as tools which needed to be treated with great respect. This meant, among other things, educating myself about drugs before taking them. I was also encouraged to take drugs for a purpose, not "just to get off."

When I refer to drugs before the age of fifteen, this is in reference to my exposure to common legal drugs such as antibiotics, wine with dinner, and coffee. All drugs were to be used in moderation. Perhaps the most important feeling I got from home was that the state I preferred to experience most of the time was the wonderful every day world of just being myself. This is all important because it provided me with a very healthy and significant attitude toward drug usage throughout my life. Although I greatly enjoy having a psychedelic experience now and again, I have never had a desire to abuse drugs and hide from my everyday world in them. This brings me back to the moment before I first ingested MDMA, when I was given a friendly parental lecture on the use of psychedelics. They told me, "this is not a magic feather, it may help you get a perspective on your life at times, but drugs alone cannot solve your problems."

When I see the unfortunate way in which many people have
discovered drugs, I realize that I had a real advantage
because my discovery was guided by intelligent
and loving parents.

My parents had been involved in psychedelic research for much of my life but despite their open conversations about it, it never really registered that they used such substances. I was vaguely aware that some of our family friends smoked pot and used LSD, but I was never directly exposed to it. It didn't bother me that some of our friends did this because from what I could tell, they did not use these drugs all the time and they were respectful of their bodies and minds when using them. I remember my parents being concerned about my knowledge of these things getting to my friends, my friends' parents, and eventually someone of legal authority. I remember thinking as a child that it seemed silly people had to be afraid of this, because as far I could tell, I had seen people, such as my grandmother, do far worse damage to their bodies, lives and souls with alcohol, which was legal and socially acceptable.

A realization

Perhaps because of the fear I felt from my parents, I began to think more about the place of illicit drugs in peoples lives. It first began to really register that my parents had taken psychedelics when I took a good look at the book shelf one day. Among the books on philosophy, pharmaceuticals and poetry, were books specifically about psychedelics. Because I had begun to seriously contemplate the meaning of illegal drugs, I began to feel the need to confront my parents on the issue. I approached my dad first. I can imagine this was a conversation my parents anticipated with both joy and reluctance. My father and I had a long talk on the porch; it was a sunny, relaxed afternoon. My father explained to me why he and my mother took psychedelics, and asked for my opinion on drugs in general.

Although I don't remember my exact age, I believe I was fifteen when I had this conversation with my father. I thought about this and many other things throughout the year. Some of my friends had begun to use drugs such as alcohol and marijuana. I had no desire to do these drugs with them because I did not like the context in which they were being used. Because so many things were new to me at that time, I wanted to learn about them in an environment where I could just be myself. I did, however, really want to experience an altered state. I wanted to explore this other world, but I didn't want to do it in the realm of my peers, where I had enough going on as it was. I decided to talk

to my parents about this desire. After they listened to my reasoning, and discussed it among themselves for awhile, we decided as a family to share my first trip. I was sixteen or seventeen at the time. My parents seemed confident about this decision, although it was obvious to me that they had thought about it quite a bit. In retrospect it must have been one of the hardest decisions of their lives.

Preparing for the experience

My parents gave me a great deal of information about MDMA, which we decided would be the best psychedelic for my first adventure. I feel the information that they gave me was relatively unbiased, as it included both favorable and unfavorable things which had been reported about it. Every step of the way it was made clear to me that I was welcome to change my mind at any point. My parents and I went to a beautiful place which was sacred to our family. It was an environment which I found very comfortable and peaceful.

At this point I actually find it difficult to describe my experience because it is so difficult to capture in words. It was indeed a whole new world. The well-developed screens and protocols through which we filter our environment dropped, yet I was still in control. I felt a tremendous sense of awareness about life and a connectedness to all things. This sensation, among other feelings, was very beneficial to me as a young person about to step out into the world. It was also simply fun. It was a wonderful, magical, amazing, feeling and I was grateful to my parents for sharing it with me.

My parents and I both felt that an initiation of some sort had occurred, and I believe it was a positive influence on my psychological and emotional development. In many ways, I had been very afraid of the world. Sensing the world in the way I did made me want to step out and embrace its diversity instead of hide from it. In many ways, I felt that the identity and spirit which was struggling to learn how to be separate from my parents had gained its first own intense and awe-inspiring experience. This is ironic because my parents were responsible for this awakening, and yet it is fitting. In many cultures, young people begin their individual paths in the world with an intense, meaningful, and jarring experience which is provided for them by the community to which they must learn to contribute.

I only used MDMA one other time with my parents before I left for college. I had continued to avoid drug usage with my peers throughout high school, but I began to use psychedelics, as well as some other drugs, about a year into college. I have never chosen to try many drugs, such as cocaine, and what drugs I have chosen to use, I have used with respect. I feel these experiences provide a valuable perspective into my life. The ability to temporarily drop the thick coat of pretense which can weigh so much in our modern, adult world gives me a new and euphoric outlook on my life and actions. I enjoy being in an altered state of mind and feel that the ability to do this has made my life richer. When I see the unfortunate way in which many people have discovered drugs, I realize that I had a real advantage because my discovery was guided by intelligent and loving parents.

I think a lot these days about how I will handle drugs with my own children. I know I will raise my children to have the same respect for drugs as I feel I was given. I don't believe all parents should give their teenagers drugs, but that is because so many things are involved in this decision. It is not a black and white issue. I do know that I am grateful I was able to approach my parents about drugs, and that I was able to share my first psychedelic experience with them. •

I think a lot these days about how

I will handle drugs with my own children...

It is not a black and white issue.