



T. Cody Swift

Psychedelic Philanthropy: Making Medicines and Reclaiming Time

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*“To be radical is to go to the root of the matter.
For man, however, the root is man himself.”*

—Karl Marx

WHY DO I SUPPORT WORK with psychedelic medicines? Because they are radical. Certainly radical in the sense that psychedelics still represent an edge in society, are probably offensive to many Puritans for their association with the war on drugs and indigenous cultures, and have been almost entirely devoid of major foundation and government funding. But psychedelics are radical also in the etymological meaning of the word, which is derived from the Latin “radix”, meaning root. Psychedelics not only have the potential to work at the root level of psychological issues, but if we accept that almost all social problems are psychological in themselves, then psychedelics may help to address the source of almost every other philanthropic effort—from environmental devastation to the volatility in our economic system. To me, these are all core reasons why private philanthropy should exactly be funding this particular niche of work.

For the past eight years, I have been working with the Riverstyx Foundation which has provided financial support to well over a dozen separate studies and organizations to increase our understanding of—and hopefully access to—the therapeutic and spiritual use of psychedelic medicines (I have also guided psilocybin sessions at Johns Hopkins, and currently am conducting qualitative research through both MAPS and Heffter). Running a charitable foundation, I’ve been keenly aware of the fact that most foundation money is untaxed wealth that otherwise would have been taxed and distributed by the government. As such, it represents a unique opportunity to support projects that would likely never otherwise be funded by the government. Directly targeting large-scale issues such as global climate change, depletion of natural resources, overpopulation, and infectious diseases are so massive and complex that even large foundation grants may be but a drop in the bucket in addressing (total private charity in the U.S. accounts for less than .1% of federal budgets). Further, as important as the humanitarian efforts of many large foundations are, these global problems

may in fact be symptoms of much more subtle cultural and economic patterns than are usually acknowledged.

One of the biggest threats to the health of our society that I have yet to see any major funding entity explicitly recognize is the broader but unspoken effect of our own anxieties playing out on a collective scale. By anxiety, I don’t mean clinical anxiety necessarily, but more generally the psychological scatter brought upon by the ever-increasing complexities of modern life: our exposure to media and technology, the abstraction of our daily experience from the natural world and other humans, the pressures born from an unjust economic system, the breakdown of guiding religious or spiritual traditions, and traumas and grief left unprocessed over lifetimes. Without guidance to affirm our deeper sources of fulfillment in life, and ritual process to reconcile our grief and these many complexities, it becomes more and more difficult to slow down long enough to remember, and be present with, what each of us finds most precious and beautiful in the world; that which is most worthy of protection. When these individual dynamics play out at the level of hundreds of millions of people, then the systems in which we live, from our families all the way up to our economic and ecological systems, reflect that internal anxiety—the dissociation between what we care for most and what we end up pursuing.

By making the choice to fund psychedelic research, philanthropists and foundations have an opportunity to address some of these more subtle psychological patterns of our modern living. This is because one of the greatest gifts of the psychedelic session or ceremony is something utterly simple, but absolutely precious in the modern day: *Time*.

In a world where time and attention are increasingly constrained by activity, psychedelics offer an ability to surrender, in the most profound way, to the expansiveness that lies beneath the daily grind. Psychedelics not only offer the opportunity to sort through some of the most potent questions about our own lives and the world, but allow us to deeply immerse ourselves

in the raw and undefined mysteries of life in general, the place from which authentic meaning naturally springs. In a session that can last over eight hours, psychedelics help cut through the morass of psychological schemas and defenses to make manifest a direct experience of our aliveness and all that has been left unattended—from our deepest sorrows to our highest joys—helping us to remember the simple and abundant richness of what life was like before time was filled. Within a psychedelic therapy session, many of the “problems” that were previously dominating one’s time and attention can become—seemingly in an instant—infinitesimally small, compared to the widened awareness that the psychedelic session affords.

Many participants in Heffter- and MAPS-sponsored studies seeking treatment for anxiety related to cancer or chronic substance addictions, for instance, often distinctly report that their sessions had relatively little to do with those targeted problems. As one participant in MAPS’ life-threatening illness study described:

This therapy was not just about me going in and coming to terms with the fact that I have a life-threatening diagnosis, that was just one little item in a whole bowl... How do I proceed, how do I make my life meaningful, enjoyable...[MDMA-assisted therapy] is a slow, well-paced journey through what needs to be addressed.

Not that the concern around cancer entirely disappears, but rather the session allows a shift in attention towards what is most important in life, along with clarity and resolve to pursue it. As one participant in the Heffter-funded cancer-anxiety study at New York University reported of his psilocybin session: “Cancer was nowhere in evidence,” rather during his session he “became aware of this huge, immeasurable, inexpressible vibrancy that was the core of my life, and my life was nothing more than an opportunity to express it.”

It is also common for participants to remember long-forgotten feelings of childhood during their sessions and to reconnect to the sense of timelessness of their early years, which can serve as a guiding re-orientation for their lives in the months and years to follow. As another participant described of her psilocybin session at NYU:

It was surreal because I never remember my childhood. I never remember anything about my childhood...[In the session] I got that sense, that whole feeling of, like, everything is just right...No daily grind, there’s no cancer, there’s no nothing. It’s just this pleasant childhood where I ran around after school and played. I literally ate from the trees!... We forget what’s really important; we get carried away with work and making our money and paying our bills, and this is just not what life is about. It’s about enjoying what’s here as well, and it doesn’t have to be extravagant.

For many participants, these effects last well beyond the session with tangible lifestyle shifts aligned with this new per-

spective. Some participants reported simply feeling less compelled to immediately return incoming emails, waking up more slowly in the morning before work, reconnecting more deeply with family and friends, and more easily able to let stressors simply “sit for a day.” As one participant poignantly described: “I just sort of let go of being so organized around time. If I have an appointment...I get there when I get there.”

Someone awaiting a social revolution might dismiss these anecdotal transformations as trivial in the face of so many of today’s dire humanitarian and ecological crises. But I believe that even the most subtle differentiation from the compulsive patterns of work and relating—when born out on a collective scale—could lead to great slowing down of the exact systems that are most threatening life. In other words, the sense of completeness and spaciousness that psychedelic therapy can afford may be the most basic antidote to an economic system fueled by our accelerated disconnection from that which is most nourishing: life itself.

Perhaps we can find solace in the psychedelic movement, expanding access to the tools that can help us to step far outside the increasingly rapid flow and scatter of modernity, to give space to reaffirm the awe and depths of life as it is, and to provide the strengthened resolve to cultivate this widened awareness in our daily lives and in the world. Through this resolve, how we spend our resources, our time, our votes, and our ways of relating may all be informed by this deeper place of connection. As this current economic system continues to squeeze people of time, the greatest role of philanthropy—which itself is a direct result of our economy’s excesses—may be helping to create opportunities for the radical reclaiming of time and being—in this case, within the sacred space of a psychedelic therapy session or ceremony.

As we continue to gain a better understanding of the impact of anxiety playing out on a global scale, and yearn to address the roots of our modern crises, I believe that more and more people will begin looking for tools with promise for our collective healing (which may explain the very recent increase in funding for psychedelic science and therapy). For me personally, as I look out into the infinite array of social issues and non-profits, this is truly one of the few movements radical enough to give me an abiding sense of hope. ●

**All quotes were taken verbatim from qualitative interviews conducted with participants in MAPS and Heffter studies.*

T. Cody Swift has a MA in existential-phenomenological psychology from Seattle University and is a director of the Riverstyx Foundation, which has helped fund psychedelic research since 2008. He is also on the board of the Heffter Research Institute, and is conducting several qualitative studies to better our understanding of the psychological and spiritual changes in participants involved in Heffter, MAPS, and CSP funded research. Recently, he has gratefully traveled to Mexico and Texas with the Native American Church to explore long-term sustainability of the peyote sacrament. He can be reached at cody@riverstyx-foundation.org.