

The Paradox of Mysteries

By Valerie Leveroni Corral



What is the real tragedy when someone dies? There are count-

less phenomena that need no imagining in telling these stories; some are jewels, some are terrors. Yet, it is only through the personal that we can speak of another's experience. If you are the one that dies then your story goes untold, unless it becomes the narrative of an onlooker. If you are the one who does not die then you are the storyteller. Is it myth, memoir, parable? Even the most sensitive observer is still only a witness, an acquaintance at best, to what really happens in those enigmatic moments as death seeks company.

I often sit with the dying because my work as the director of the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana (WAMM) allows me the opportunity to share a deep and meaningful relationship with many of our members right up to the moment of their deaths. But do I fully understand what I am seeing? And how different is that from what my dying friend is really experiencing?

I proposed writing an article about people facing end-of-life and their use of entheogens. I began this pseudo-psychedelic venture by soliciting the participation of a couple of friends who are dying; one closely riding the rails, the other, actively defying the lure into never-neverland. However, like every "plan" that I have endeavored to explore regarding someone else's death, my "expectations" were dashed by my friends' responses. Both had been psychedelic voyagers in the past and remarked that their achieved "awareness" had prepared them significantly for their newfound practice, facing death. One is a Buddhist, the other, is "not not a Buddhist." So, I looked to my family, my brother, Mark who consumed mushrooms regularly; and my father, Mario who never used psychedelic drugs. Both were warriors.

What intrigued me about Mark was that he used mushrooms like no other person I have known. In deference to the chaotic dysphoria of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that characterized his daily life, when Mark ingested a handful of the mushroom, true magic happened. The magic was that he felt normal. "Normal" was relaxed, at ease and even happy. Since his return from Vietnam in 1968, where he served as a combat medic during the Tet Offensive and in Dak To, like many young soldiers he was plagued. PTSD is an insidious illness and can pursue an individual as pervasively as the enemy. He was never meant to take lives, he was meant to enrich them.

Mark attempted to find balance amidst the madness of this world; he sought reconciliation and peace. And somehow, when he partook of the mushroom, everything harsh that had been, was no more. There was only this moment. He was happy. He arrived at a state where chaos and peace blend in flawless harmony. Even an experienced psychedelic pioneer would have a difficult time ascertaining that he had entered into anything resembling an altered state. He behaved normally, so normally that he relied on his use of psilocybin, in particular, as a tool for achieving serenity. It may be that his limbic system, which deals with all aspects of emotion, had been so traumatized by decades of PTSD that his ingestion, instead of provoking a hallucination, stimulated his brain in some way to evoke a particular experience pleasant in nature, rather than stimulating the memory of traumatic past events.

When the body is under stress the brain produces neurochemicals that activate it to respond. Chronic stress suppresses protective agents and causes damage to the neurons, the axons and the dendrites. The brain becomes adapted to the production of these certain neurochemicals. This results in abnormal brain activity, which can sometimes cause complex hallucinations. Yet, in Mark it appears that hallucinogens may have altered the production of neurochemicals to stimulate emotions associated with a sense of well-being.

Mark died unexpectedly on January 02, 2010. What remains are questions. What happened? Had he enough of his tattered body, poisoned by Agent Orange, pained by wounds from decades past? Did he see an opportunity or did his heart just fail to beat? Did Mistress Death seduce him into some unspeakable paradise?

My father's death, on the other hand, is not such a mystery. He contracted a glioblastoma, a brain tumor and he died within a few months of his diagnosis. But it also raises the question of the production of neurochemicals and their role in "visions" or mystical experiences associated with end-of-life.

When my father was dying he asked me to engage in what was for him particularly unusual behavior. Half of my solidly Italian family is Catholic. My father was not really a religious man, but was always very grounded in his relationship with nature and reveled in her sheer majesty. He taught me many things about how to "be" on the planet and how to be at ease in my environment. He never read the esoteric teachings, but as his illness progressed so did his request for more participation in obscure ceremony. I came to find that some of the rituals he instructed us to carry out might have been lifted directly from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* had he been familiar



Valerie Leveroni Corral
valerie@wamm.org • www.wamm.org

Photo by David Jay Brown

with the text. I was both surprised and amazed. I approached his doctor with the information, the Director of Neurosurgery at UC Medical Center in San Francisco. He told me that my father's experiences were merely a function of the brain and that I could look to these occurrences of "mysticism" as phenomena generated by the production of neurochemicals associated with brain cancer and with death in general.

This was my father and if ever I had a reason to believe that there was something to all of this out-of-body experiencing, now was the time. It was 1989, 16 years after my own personal experience with a brain trauma that

left me wondering just how much science there was involved in mapping the brain. A young Danish resident overheard the words of his mentor and noticing my melancholy, took me aside. "Listen" he said, "there is much about the brain that we don't know. There are some things that can't really be explained." I wanted so to believe this. But I was shaken.

Still, my father's requests continued and we obliged. One day, unbeknownst to him, a peyote sweat lodge was being conducted for his healing. We stayed with him, massaging his feet, drinking in his fragrance, offering sips of water. He rested peacefully. Then he said aloud, "I am in an igloo, only it is very hot and I am sweating. It is strange to me." I asked if he was uncomfortable. He answered, not really, that it felt like he was purging something. We wondered how he could possibly know about the ceremony. My father had quit the use of all treatment and medications. He said that he did not want anything to interfere when he passed into what he described only as "indescribably beautiful."

Then something inexplicable happened. It involved my direct experience. My father had taken to long periods of meditation. We would often sit together. One day he raised his hand and said, "Let's meditate." Okay. I put my hand to his. Soon I felt myself rising, weightlessly drifting upward. And I arrived in a stillness and then my father arrived. Suddenly, he exploded into a jillion bits of ether, like particles of dust in sunlight. I was awestruck. I heard my voice speaking, "Ah, I want to do th..." And as swiftly as I had arrived, I fell. With an abrupt force I hit some bottom place. Stunned, I opened my eyes. Slowly my father opened his and he spoke these words, "Hhhaaa, Val that was beautiful, let's do it again, only this time you come with me."

I tried, but I never did make it to that place again, not with him. I have often wondered what neurochemicals my father's brain stimulated in my own brain as we meditated together on that afternoon in March.

These are temptations that suggest any number of possibilities. I know only that with the death of my father and my brother, no one will ever love me like they did. Nor will I be seen as they saw me, from the moment of my birth and who they envisioned from my baby self to whom I am today. With them also dies the unique ways in which they perceived me. They were my heroes and my biggest fans. And this is a story that I tell of them. Are they psychedelic teachers? Are they gurus or wise men? They are the men who saw me and who loved me. The men that I love still, and this is just one version of the jewels that they are. This is the story of the becoming of Masters. •