

# NAVIGATION WITHIN CONSCIOUSNESS

## INSIGHTS FROM FOUR DECADES OF PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH WITH IMAGERY, MUSIC, AND ENTHEOGENS\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *The author's participation in early (1963-1964) research with music, imagery, and entheogens with Hanscarl Leuner and Walter Pahnke at the University of Göttingen is described, along with the subsequent contributions of Helen Bonny and the development of Guided Affective Imagery (GAI) into Guided Imagery and Music (GIM). Guidelines for effective work with imagery and music are discussed with reference to the entelechy of the interpersonally-grounded psyche, the paradox of ego strength and ego transcendence, and the importance of accepting the experiential content manifesting in the present moment. Reflections are offered on the potential value of transcendental experiences.*

*Key words: Consciousness, Music and imagery, Hanscarl Leuner, Helen Bonny, psilocybin*

### I

It was an honor to contribute to the [2004] symposium on music and consciousness, sponsored by the Bonny Foundation, and especially to celebrate the uniquely wise and sacred contributions of my long-term friend and colleague, Helen Bonny. When I asked myself how my life unfolded as it has, interweaving my love of music, my spirit of adventure in exploring other states of consciousness and spirituality, and my dedication to decreasing unnecessary suffering in the world through the search for more effective forms of psychotherapy, some unforgettable experiences emerged from my memory. In this article, I reflect on these experiences and invite you to follow me back in time.

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Some forty years ago, I found myself as a graduate student at Georg-August University in Göttingen Germany, studying theology and psychiatry. A psychiatrist there by name of Hanscarl Leuner (1962), head of the psychotherapy division of the university, just had published a monograph entitled *Die experimentelle Psychose* (The experimental psychoses). In its pages, he reported on the states of consciousness described by patients and healthy volunteer subjects during the action of substances such as mescaline, psilocybin and LSD, then called “psycholytic” (mind-releasing). Subsequently these mysterious molecules came to be called “psychedelic” (mind-expanding) as well as many other labels ranging from “psychotomimetics” to “mysticomimetics.” The medical community has tended to use the misnomer “hallucinogens.” Most recently the term “entheogens,” literally meaning *God-containing* has come into vogue (Jesse, 2001).

At that time, 1963 to be exact, Leuner was not yet fully cognizant of the potent variables of mental set (the attitudes one brings to the opportunity to explore alternative states of consciousness) and physical and interpersonal setting (the safety and security promoted by pleasant surroundings and trustworthy, caring people). His volunteers generally were administered the experimental substance and left alone. Not surprising from what we know today, many experienced panic and paranoid reactions amid changes in sensory perception, colorful bursts of mental imagery, altered perception of time, and regression to traumas of childhood, feeding the hope of the time that these substances might facilitate our comprehension of schizophrenia. Paralleling his investigations with entheogens, Leuner was well-known in European psychiatric circles for his creative work with mental imagery in dynamically-oriented psychotherapy, which he called “experimentelles katatymes Bilderleben” (EkB), generally translated as “Guided Affective Imagery” (GAI; Leuner, 1984; Leuner, Horn & Klessman, 1983).

One of Leuner’s graduate students, Gerhard Baer, was implementing a comparative study of two short-acting forms of psilocybin (CZ-74 & CEY-19). Psilocybin is the active principle of the so-called “sacred mushrooms” that have been integral to the religious ceremonies of Indians in Mexico and Central America for at least two thousand years and still continue in use today. I was taking myself much too seriously in those days, often going without breakfast to write down all my dreams from the prior night. (I called it “collecting phenomenological data”; in retrospect, I know breakfast would have been much more helpful to me.) Nonetheless, when two of my friends told me of their participation in the psilocybin research project and the experiences from early childhood they had uncovered, I decided to see if I could be included in the research myself. I had heard that this experimental substance might engender a hallucination, and I had never seen one and

thought that might really be a worthwhile educational experience. It is important to note that, at that point in time, the signs all over campus that said "LSD" referred to the liberal student democrats. No one had heard of Timothy Leary or Richard Alpert, or the so-called "Harvard scandal" brewing on the other side of the Atlantic.

At any rate, I briefly was interviewed by Dr. Leuner, mainly to determine the extent of my alcohol usage, which was minimal. Soon thereafter, I was led to a dimly lit basement room with a small bed and end table, given an injection of psilocybin, and left alone. Drawing on the Methodist piety of my childhood, along with my yearning for enhanced personal integration, I chose to surrender my life to that Ground of Being I called "God" and awaited the arrival of some childhood conflict, or at least a decent hallucination. To my incredible surprise, I instead discovered myself awakening into an exquisitely beautiful, mystical form of consciousness outside of time. Those of you who have known similar states of consciousness will comprehend that words are poetic at best when one attempts to describe such experiences. Whether "I" experienced it, or "It" experienced me was a matter of semantics; All I knew was that I was participating in something incredibly real and wonderful that intuitively was recognized as familiar, and as more basic than the world of everyday consciousness. It included what William James (1902) called *noetic* qualities—intuitive knowledge regarding the reality of that Core of Being many call "God," the miraculous beauty and sacredness of life, the indestructibility of consciousness (immortality), the relativity of the Kantian categories of Time, Space, Substance and Causality, and the interrelatedness of us all within a web of infinitely-expanded consciousness (called the Brotherhood of Man in religious circles).

In the midst of this incredible epiphany, Dr. Baer entered with white-coat and stethoscope, asked me to open my eyes and sit up on the edge of the bed, and was very seriously intent on checking my knee reflexes. As he hammered on my knees and scribbled down his findings, I sat on the edge of the bed with my arms outstretched, feeling infinite compassion for science in its infancy. I felt that the researchers could not begin to imagine what was happening in my field of consciousness and was profoundly humbled and awe-struck. The only "music" in this initial session, incidentally, was caused by the collection of the hospital's metal garbage cans in the alley outside my window. This, I experienced as "tinkling temple bells."

Subsequently, as I purchased and studied a copy of Leuner's monograph, I noted less than a page devoted to "Cosmic-Mystical Experiences," phenomena his subjects rarely had reported, but that he included in his book for the sake of comprehensiveness. After I had written a description of the experience I had encountered and shared it with Dr. Leuner, I became known as "that interesting American student who had the

mystical experience," and soon became a volunteer research assistant in his clinic. During the subsequent year, I participated in the discovery of the importance of set and setting, and in the early use of music during the period of entheogen-action. Also, I was enlisted to serve as a companion or guide for English-speaking professionals who wanted to experience the effects of entheogens in a maximally safe and legal manner while visiting Leuner's clinic.

The design of the research project, for which I had volunteered, required receiving psilocybin on four occasions, each of two short-acting substances in two dosage levels. I found that none of the subsequent three sessions proved to be transcendental, though each was interesting on a personal, psychodynamic level. After the fourth session, I found myself wondering if I had been naïve and gullible, if I had projected my knowledge of mysticism onto diffuse altered brain functioning. I asked myself whether what I had called spiritual was merely some atypical variety of ordinary sexual pleasure.

### *Walter Pahnke and the Introduction of Music*

It was at that point in time that Walter Pahnke arrived in Göttingen, having just completed his dissertation at Harvard, which focused on the now famous "Good Friday Experiment." In that research project, he had given either psilocybin or nicotinic acid (vitamin B-6) to theological students in a double-blind manner, in the basement chapel of Boston University's Marsh Chapel. Wally had found that those who received psilocybin did indeed report significantly more mystical phenomena than those who received nicotinic acid (Pahnke 1963). He had been awarded a travelling fellowship to visit clinics throughout Europe where research with entheogens was taking place, and had chosen to settle with his wife and children in Göttingen, as Leuner's research operation was the most comprehensive at the time. We met in the clinic there and quickly became good friends.

After I described my four psilocybin sessions to Wally, he proposed a fifth experiment, in which we would employ a slightly higher dose of psilocybin and also use music during the period of entheogen-action. Wally was aware that music often was being used by persons in the Boston area who had been exploring the states of consciousness engendered by these substances, and also that music was in use in Saskatchewan and in California where other research projects were in progress. Dr. Leuner agreed with the proposal, I consented, and Wally and I went shopping for music. In particular I recall purchasing a copy of Brahms' *German Requiem* and Bach's *Fantasia & Fugue in G Minor*.

The subsequent session, on Valentine's Day of 1964, proved to be a pivotal point in my personal and professional development. I had feared that I had exaggerated whatever had occurred in that first psilocybin session.

Instead I realized that I already had forgotten most of it, and had minimized what actually had occurred. The consciousness in which I participated returned again and again to that mystical peak of awareness, its intuitive validity being etched into my brain so strongly that I never since have questioned its fundamental truth. My report of that session, incidentally, was subsequently published (Richards, 1968); I chose to publish it under a pseudonym as it felt inappropriate to claim it as "my experience" in a possessive, potentially ego-aggrandizing manner. In addition to the supportive presence of Wally and the bright, cheerful space with plants where we conducted the session, I found the music exceptionally beautiful and facilitative of transitions in consciousness. One approach to the mystical that I never will forget coincided with the ascending chromatic passage and climax in Bach's *Fantasia in G Minor* for organ. Another musical treasure we began utilizing was Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, a piece Helen Bonny included in her Positive Affect program long before it became "The Theme Song from Platoon."

*The Maryland Psychiatric Research Center and Helen Bonny*

When my year of study in Germany was completed in 1964, I returned to the United States with a professional identity clearly focused in the Psychology of Religion. Subsequent educational opportunities included studies with Walter Houston Clark (1969) and Abraham Maslow (1964), both of whom seriously were interested in the religious, psychological and societal implications of the research I had encountered in Göttingen. Wally Pahnke and I stayed up one night in 1966 and co-authored an article invited by the *Journal of Religion and Health*, entitled, "Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism" (Pahnke & Richards, 1966). When the article appeared, we found that reporters from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines immediately pursued us. There was an excitement then of feeling on the threshold of important new knowledge, and the determination to keep as steady as possible and to avoid unproductive publicity. The misuse and abuse of entheogenic substances were constituting a social problem. The United States government was responding with increasingly repressive legislation and the FDA was withdrawing permission to pursue promising research operations in universities.

One center where research was permitted to continue was at the Spring Grove State Hospital in Baltimore, which was about to expand into the newly envisioned Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Wally and I both were offered employment there in 1967 and moved to Baltimore, along with a cadre of like-minded souls including among others Charles Savage and Stanislav Grof. The Spring Grove Research Department had two grants funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, exploring the promise of

LSD in the treatment of alcoholism and of severe neuroses (Kurland, Savage, Pahnke, Grof, & Olsson, 1971; McCabe, Savage, Kurland, & Unger, 1972), and research using entheogens and music in the treatment of the physical and emotional distress associated with terminal cancer was just beginning (Richards, 1978).

In 1968, following a conference in Council Grove, Kansas, sponsored by the Menninger Foundation, entitled "The Voluntary Control of Internal States" which Helen Bonny had helped to organize, Helen was invited to join our team at the Spring Grove Hospital. We were very happy that she accepted the offer and moved eastward, along with her husband and three children. Helen quickly systematized, integrated and improved upon the music selections we were using, developing valuable sequences of music with labels such as "Peak Experience," "Positive Affect," "Affect Release" or "Comforting/Anaclitic," and also published her first book, *Music and Your Mind* (Bonny & Savary, 1973). Coupled with this music, Leuner's "Guided Affective Imagery" (GAI) evolved into "Guided Imagery and Music" (GIM). The Institute for Consciousness and Music came into being, along with workshops and training modules. Several years of very creative research projects ensued at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, utilizing music and various entheogenic substances until around 1977, when political winds and funding sources on the State level rendered the research dormant.

For approximately 25 years, as research with entheogens remained essentially dormant in the United States, I found myself pursuing a private psychotherapy practice. I continued to utilize music with many of my patients and to work out of a transpersonally-oriented mind-set, congruent with the research that had been accomplished. During the past three years, in collaboration with the Council on Spiritual Practices, based in San Francisco, I again have been given the opportunity to implement a carefully designed research project utilizing an entheogen and am happy to be building upon the research from the 1960s and early 1970s.

## II

Now, looking back over approximately 40 years of living and working with a transpersonal orientation, what have I learned that persons interested in music and consciousness might value? I recall receiving an appreciative letter from the adult daughter of a terminal cancer patient. We had given LSD to her mother in the context of brief psychotherapy, and the preexisting estrangement between the mother and her daughter had been resolved. The daughter wrote, "Dear Dr. Richards, Thank you so much for telling me that the only way to conquer your fears is to face them. I didn't know that." Her letter struck me as saying something akin to, "Thank you for telling me that

water is wet; I didn't know that." To those of us in the mental health field, principles of navigating in human consciousness often appear so obvious that we assume everyone else must know them. At the risk of insulting some readers who may view the following principles as obvious, I will specify some of the guidelines that underlie my work with people today, all of which are congruent with the orientation Helen Bonny has articulated for Guided Imagery and Music.

### *The Entelechy of the Interpersonally-Grounded Psyche*

The most basic principle may be expressed as "The Entelechy of the Interpersonally-Grounded Psyche." *Entelechy* is a philosophical term, referring to a meaningful process of psychological and/or spiritual content emerging from within the field of consciousness in a wise and orderly manner. I have come to believe that each person's psyche is infinitely wiser than the egos of the patient and therapist (or traveler and guide) and, if trusted, will manifest the experiential sequences of imagery, memories, emotions, revelations and insights needed to facilitate conflict-resolution, communication with the sacred realms of the Self, and healing.

When I accompany someone into his or her internal world, with or without the facilitation of an entheogen, I feel somewhat like being present beside the person in an opera house as the lights dim, the curtain opens, and the drama begins to unfold. My role is to be supportive and present without interfering or imposing my own agendas. Each person's own psyche knows what needs to be experienced or encountered, and has ingenious strategies for choreographing those psychodynamic and/or archetypal dramas. Very quickly the observer of the opera discovers himself or herself on stage, deeply engaged and involved in the story that is unfolding.

Thus, I rarely suggest imaginal content but instead meet the person wherever he or she finds himself or herself and facilitate exploration of the experiential world. If a person finds it especially hard to "get started," I may on occasion suggest imagining a neutral image, such as a door, a staircase or a path, but no more than that. I let the person tell me what the door looks like and feels like, what the staircase is made of and whether it is ascending or descending, or through which particular landscape the path is leading. As I inquire about details, such as the design, composition and tactile feel of a door, the vividness of the experience typically seems to increase. If a person claims to imagine nothing at all, we might talk about what that "nothing" feels like, valuing emptiness as much as dramatic and colorful phantasmagoria. As many readers may have experienced, it is often by accepting the mundane and empty that we encounter experiences that are profound and full of richly detailed imagery.

I stress the importance of the term “Interpersonally-Grounded.” I believe that the productive utilization of mental imagery in psychotherapy occurs only in the context of a well-established relationship. Thus I recommend that the tools of Guided Imagery and Music be employed only when and if an intuitive sense of fundamental trust between guide and subject is present. It is likely that such interpersonal trust then parallels an intrapersonal trust in the dialogue between the subject’s everyday ego and so-called “deeper levels of consciousness.” With or without entheogens, experiences with music and alternate states of consciousness easily can lead to unproductive episodes of panic and paranoia if the relationship is not first well established.

In the safety of a healthy relationship, the subject is capable of manifesting honesty, courage and curiosity. Should an incompletely resolved conflict present itself in the field of consciousness, perhaps in the form of a monster or dragon, it is critical that the experiencing subject move towards the monster, as if saying, “Hello. Do you ever look scary. What are you doing in my mind? Is there something you can teach me?” In preparing persons for sessions with music and/or entheogens, we instruct them to dive towards such phenomena as if diving into a swimming pool—reaching out for the hand of the therapist at the same time if needed. When that occurs, the transformation of the symbol inevitably takes place, usually with accompanying catharsis and understanding. The monster becomes the abusing parent, or the fear of failure, or the unresolved grief or guilt. Light penetrates the darkness, and the experience moves on into new areas of exploration.

If trust is not yet ripe and one attempts to control the experience, or to run away from the monster, then of course the typical nightmare sequence ensues. The faster one runs from one’s own Shadow, the faster it comes in pursuit and the more the panic builds. When one tears off the eyeshade and headphones and sits up in a cold sweat, the conflict only temporarily has been avoided and still awaits resolution. With entheogens, incidentally, it is then that the so-called “flashback phenomenon” appears to become more probable. When severely stressed or sleep deprived, the unresolved conflicts that have been awakened and avoided again may manifest themselves in the field of consciousness, presumably in search of more complete resolution.

### *The Paradox of Ego Strength and Ego Transcendence*

Those who have pursued dynamically-oriented psychotherapy or self-exploration know the paradox that one must have a reasonably strong ego, a developed individual sense of self, before one can feel sufficiently safe in the world to choose unconditionally to trust so-called deeper or higher dimensions of being within consciousness. Such a choice tends to be

made in the company of the right supportive people at the right time in the right place.

Stated differently, it is important to have a sense of personal identity and ego strength before one goes off to explore other states of consciousness. This is why many young persons who experiment with entheogenic substances either report experiences of minimal significance or get themselves in psychiatric trouble. Ironically in our culture, it generally has been true that those who should not take entheogens have been experimenting with them. Conversely, the mature, stable members of society who might benefit most profoundly from the exploration of alternative states of consciousness have not had legal access to entheogens, and thus have tended not to explore their potential value. The average man-in-the-street does not think about Aldous Huxley, Huston Smith or Alan Watts when he hears the term "entheogen" or "psychedelic drug"; he is more likely to picture a disturbed teenager in an emergency room.

Hard to articulate though it is, it is important to realize that when one enters into a session that is focused on the interior of one's consciousness, that one is not simply reclining on a couch and "being passive." Apathy is not trust, though they may share some remarkable similarities. I like to emphasize the word "choice" as one *chooses* to engage oneself with the higher or deeper phenomena of consciousness and to trust unconditionally on the threshold of ego-transcendence.

I also have come to feel that it is very important to love and respect the everyday ego. Self-respect and self-acceptance do not constitute "inflation" or "egoism." Paul Tillich wrote perceptively about the necessity to "accept acceptance in spite of our unacceptability" (Tillich, 1952). I am wary of misconstrued so-called Eastern approaches that would "kill off the ego," as in my experience those attitudes often culminate in inner-directed anger and deepened depression. The ego may be transcended by accepting the embrace of unconditional love from the depths of the psyche. The ego then may be experienced as melting into sacred realms of consciousness in harmony with the classic Hindu image of the drop of water that constitutes the Atman merging with the ocean of Brahman. In retrospect egos may not be viewed as the most real or fundamental manifestation of reality, but they have their place in the totality of created being. Indeed, it is the ego that manifests the Bodhisattva Ideal or who becomes the Suffering Servant described by the Second Isaiah once mystical consciousness fades and the ego is reborn in the world of time.

*The Importance of Accepting Where One Finds Oneself*

Martin Heidegger, the well-known existentialist who wrote *Being and Time* (1926), articulated a concept I have found very helpful, called *Befindlichkeit*. Perhaps it might be translated “discovering oneself in the present moment.” The idea is that you imagine that you just awaken, look around you, and “discover” who you are and where you find yourself. For example, I might discover that I am a man in my early 60’s on the planet earth in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century who has a certain collection of memories and tends to think, perceive and value in certain ways. There is a certain freshness about such “discovery.” To extend this principle into a session with music, with or without the additional catalyst of entheogenic action, I stress the importance of accepting the content being experienced without judgement. Though I alluded to this principle earlier, now I would further underscore its importance.

Many persons appear to work through various personal psychodynamic conflicts en route to arriving at the threshold of ego transcendence and the encounter either with archetypes such as gods, goddesses, temples and precious metals and gemstones, or immersion in unitive, mystical states of consciousness. In Ederveen, Holland, a suburb of Amsterdam, a psychiatrist by name of Hemmo Arendsen-Hein designed and built a structure at the psychiatric hospital where he worked that included several small rooms for so-called “psycholytic therapy.” There he would administer entheogens in low dosage over a period of several weeks to first help his patients work through traditional psychodynamic issues on a personal level. Then, when he felt the patient was ready, he would lead the patient into a very beautifully-appointed larger room, complete with carpeting and Eastern art, looking out onto a grassy area with swans swimming in a pond. There, with the additional use of music, he would administer a higher dose of an entheogen in a session he called “psychedelic” in hopes of facilitating a profoundly transformative transcendental experience.

Some persons, however, appear to quite easily experience transcendental forms of consciousness and then, empowered with the enhanced security provided by such experiences, zero in on very ordinary—and often very painful—psychodynamic and interpersonal issues. Some persons seem to progress through the stages of so-called “perinatal experience” conceptualized by Stanislav Grof (1975); others find their journeys differently designed.

I have come to believe that it is very important simply to accept wherever one finds oneself and to trust each unique process of discovery and resolution. There are heavens and hells in all of us, and much to learn in each realm. Mystical experiences inevitably are experienced as gifts. In terms of Christian theology, they are manifestations of Grace—something we receive

with all due humility, not something we cause to occur. Thus I suggest that we honor whatever experience is occurring in the moment, whether mundane or dramatic. There is no competition here, no "brownie points" given for ecstatic discoveries. If a person discovers himself in a dusky basement, I would suggest it is profoundly important for the guide to honor that place and steadily provide support as the person seeks out the darkest corner he can find and shines his searchlight into it. The most trivial detail can open into Transcendence, and experiences of Transcendence can lead back into time to focus on the reexamination of matters we often tend to label mundane.

### III

#### Concerning the Value of Transcendental Experiences

Awe-inspiring as archetypal and mystical forms of consciousness can be, it always is wise to keep in mind the distinction articulated by Huston Smith (1964, 2000) between "religious experiences" and "religious lives." "Having experiences" of whatever kind can be a helpful beginning, akin to the concept of "Awakening" in classical mysticism. However, the ongoing task must focus on the integration of our knowledge and insights. Perhaps this is the assignment of our journeys through time and the function of spiritual communities to support and nurture us in this endeavor. Let us recall the Zen ideal of being fully awake in the present moment as we "chop wood and carry water."

Clearly there is value to be found in many different varieties of alternate states of consciousness, especially in psychodynamic, archetypal and mystical realms of experience. Though in my experience, no one encounter with the personal self or transpersonal dimensions of being automatically ensures good mental health or spiritual maturity, it is clear to me that such experiences can facilitate human growth and self-actualization (Richards, 2003). Mystical forms of consciousness in particular appear to have a lasting effect on one's self-concept. It is hard to return to a mind-set characterized by alienation and estrangement when potent memories of unitive consciousness remain. It is all but impossible to view oneself as worthless, once love and beauty have been encountered within, which incidentally may be a primary contribution these approaches to psychotherapy can make in the treatment of addictions. Death ceases to be a specter, once the memory of mystical consciousness is present in one's awareness (Richards, Grof, Goodman, & Kurland, 1972).

Empirical support for the value of transcendental experiences still is limited, but for those interested in such studies I reference a project I did with terminal cancer patients in which the subset of patients who experienced mystical consciousness manifested some measurable differences in

psychological test scores, when compared with the subset of patients who only experienced non-mystical forms of consciousness (Richards, Rhead, DiLeo, Yensen, & Kurland, 1977). Also of interest is Rick Doblin's (2001) recent follow-up study of the theological students who volunteered for Walter Pahnke's "Good Friday Experiment," close to 40 years after their psilocybin experiences.

The role of archetypal and mystical experiences in the origin and evolution of world religions constitutes another promising area of inquiry in a world that yearns for peace and understanding between diverse cultures. Paul Tillich was beginning to envisage a systematic theology of world religions at the time of his death (Eliade, 1966; Tillich, 1963) and frontier contributions in this creative arena of thought have been published by Diana Eck (1993), Wayne Teasdale (1999) and Huston Smith (2000). It could be quite fascinating to see what the next four decades hold for us all as, with appreciative spirits, we continue to explore the mysteries of music and of consciousness.

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