

Conscious Conversations:

Richard Doyle, author of *Darwin's Pharmacy*, co-author *Dark Side of the Shroom*

conducted by Jeffrey Morel

Richard Doyle is optimistic about the future of psychedelics in Western culture. That's why he's critical of the so-called psychedelic renaissance, as a product of the culture industry hype machine that would seek to standardize and control how we interact with these plant medicines from the top down.

A professor of English at Penn State, Doyle literally wrote the book on humanity's coevolution with psychedelics—one of them, anyway—called *Darwin's Pharmacy: Sex, Plants, and the Evolution of the Noosphere*, which makes the case for consciousness-altering plants like ayahuasca facilitating the development of language as a frontier for sexual selection.

More recently, he coauthored with Trey Conner and Neşe Devenot of the University of South Florida St Petersburg and the University of Cincinnati, respectively, the article [*Dark Side of the Shroom*](#), about the risks of psychedelic capitalism attempting to commodify and reduce the profundity of our healing experiences with these plants to just another chemical compound corporations can patent and prescribe for a material profit. Not only does this top-down approach reinforce the sociopolitical imbalances contributing to our worsening mental health crisis, the authors argue, but it also neglects to acknowledge the stigmas of prohibition or learn from the rich countercultural and indigenous healing traditions scientific and corporate communities now want to appropriate without paying their due respects.

I reached out to Doyle for an interview to contextualize the cultural baggage we're all as individuals and a society bringing to our experiences with psychedelic plants amidst are so called psychedelic Renaissance. After months of missed connections, we finally got on the phone for a 2-hour dialogue covering everything from the scientific argument for plant sentience, to why The Grateful Dead are more influential than Johns Hopkins researchers in spreading the psychedelic gospel of non-dual consciousness, to why bicycling and meditation may be just as important as psilocybin or ayahuasca for awakening from the Western materialist worldview. Our exchange below has been edited for brevity and clarity.

Jeffrey Morel: Thanks for agreeing to speak with me. I'm hoping this can be the first of an ongoing series of interviews with psychedelic thought leaders, exploring how these substances integrate into our society.

Richard Doyle: There's a lot of blah blah out there already about psychedelics that's totally hyped and unreflective about the mass incarceration and prohibition we just went through. All risks a certain kind of technological cheerleading and venture capital yumminess, like “yay, it's it's legal now! Yay, dad's letting us take psychedelics...in very controlled proper ways.” A lot of it is awfully inauthentic, and I'm finding in the scholarly world a lot of pressure to legitimize a

model we could call “psychedelics without the psychedelic worldview.” Can we just make sure these are strictly defined within an already failed scientific, materialist model of consciousness policing?

[However] I find an equal attempt for people to articulate a way in which ayahuasca, for example, is not a pharmaceutical—meaning the main action cannot be described as some sort of molecule or combination of molecules with other therapeutic protocols that could become intellectual property. Now I'm extremely optimistic—I'm just contextualizing by saying, there's this way in which the web becomes filled with enthusiasm about things like mindfulness, and then it moves on and nobody does any of it.

JR: It can become this trend that's taken out of context. With cannabis and now psychedelics as they become more mainstream, we can ignore where we're coming from, and how many people are still incarcerated and demonized for their use.

RD: And how little attention we've paid to how they've been working for thousands of years. There is no psychedelic renaissance; there is a collective decision that it's okay now and not too weird to encourage these things. What's fascinating is it happened extremely rapidly. I'm not a conspiratorial person, but it all felt very well-marketed, and it has that capacity of actively erasing everything that's coming before. [W]e're not going to be able to learn from and heal with these medicines as well as we could if we completely strip them of that context. This is not some desire to impossibly do justice to the barbaric past—that's never going to happen. But we also don't want to turn psychedelics into just another mental health tool. The discourse has this magic bullet quality that is so disingenuous, because it's hard work to go on this path, and to act like it's some snazzy new influencer thing you can install in your noggin like a blender has a comparative shopping consumer culture problem written all over it.

JM: [So] it's not that this tiny speck of time is a psychedelic renaissance, but more emerging from a psychedelic famine.

RD: I reject that too—we never stopped using them. It's only that it's safe for the norms now. We're not afraid to mention it at a cocktail party. When I came back as a professor at Penn State from my Ayahuasca healing, which was too profound to ignore, I learned to be polite about it, but there was a desire to share that made people feel like there was a ghost in the room. It's been fascinating how we've undergone this shift from where you're not allowed to talk about that, to now you have to. You have to have an opinion, and you have to show how open you are to the fact that we can now do controlled studies under scientific conditions. Like, have you been paying any attention at all? Have you ever heard of the Grateful Dead? They were a far more powerful influence on psychedelic culture than my beloved and admired colleagues at Johns Hopkins ever could be—so I reject the idea that there was a famine. We're just rebranding an already existing experience, and in many cases stealing it from the people who have been curating it through the long prohibition.

JM: It's more like they're penetrating the hierarchical forms of knowledge, so even though it was always there, it was in circles that didn't have the broader global academic, scientific, or corporate [legitimacy]. It was isolated from the public eye.

RD: Yes and no. It was an open secret. They weren't legitimate before, and now they're becoming legitimate because they fit into our broken model of human health. How is it that mainstream science deserves a monopoly on psychedelic science? What has it done but participate in that very prohibition and reject the epistemologies that come along with it? This reductionist, mechanistic, causal model of biological systems was killed very slowly by the human genome project, which tried to execute such a model of the living system that we were all infinite causal webs woven by our DNA that could be edited like a divine holy book...It really doesn't work that way. [T]he genome is more akin to a network than a scroll, and there are thousands of interacting genes that are at least as complicated as the brain they give rise to.

Now, to make it legitimate, we have this language of energy instead of chemistry, and it really calls for more humility than that. We need to realize one of the reasons there was a prohibition was because psychedelic science produced results in the 1960s that were distressing to the ordinary scientific model. Timothy Leary took mushrooms with prisoners at Concord because he was following the data, that you can't study psychedelic experiences as an object distinct from the explorer, and that violated a prohibition that science had had since the Royal Society in the 17th century: that the observer would be separate from that which is observed. Quantum physics already messed with that in the early 20th century, and that was part of why the scientific community [couldn't] control and make psychedelics safe for integration into mainstream culture. Because it messed with a now outdated mechanistic causal scientific method, because there's no real way to study psychedelic experience without studying yourself.

JM: How can ecodelic plants help us dismantle those precepts that result in deeply unequal societies in the first place?

RD: The first and easy answer is by growing them and eating them. [E]codelic plants are part of an evolutionary toolkit for experiencing ego death. One of the things that characterizes psychedelic experience is [exposing] the taken for granted nature of the "I" that is separate from the other. They erode that experience of "I Me Mine" (George Harrison) that is that the basis of this ecodelic crisis we're having on a planetary scale. That is, the unsatisfiable maw of the consuming ego, that wherever it is replicated, there is infinite demand for goods and services and experiences that radically increase our thermodynamic output without a concomitant increase in understanding ourselves as systems of connection. This endless need to avoid the present moment by filling it with stuff can be greatly withered, if not eradicated, through focused and sincere psychonautical practice.

The ego creates such a reality tunnel that all it can see is opportunities for energy expenditure of the sort that it already knows, so it thinks we need to burn all the fossil fuels and use as much energy up as possible. But if we only burn off fossil fuels, we don't realize we're soaking in terawatts of energy from the sun, and we'll never get to the point where we can squander even larger amounts of energy and do things like hopscotch between stars and so forth. Because we'll just be feeding the ego until that being goes extinct from an impossible carbon footprint on a planet that can't support that. So it's withdrawing from that tunnel vision and those feedback loops to be able to invest in other forms of energy.

There's not a lot I need actually, even though I'm trained to gather more and more inputs to generate more and more outputs. Psychedelics can sometimes help us get [to that realization]. They're neither necessary nor sufficient to the journey, but for a numbskull like myself in 2002, I definitely needed those skillful means, as the Buddhist tradition would call them. They were part of that general practice of learning to live in present moment and appreciate the miraculous surplus within which we're living. You can say, "Oh that's you, you're an upper middle class, overeducated white guy, so of course there's a surplus." I'm not really talking about that, although it's important to return to. I'm talking about the egoic need to constantly make up for some feeling of lack, which is an invention of that false feeling of separation which ecodelics can help us tune out of.

JM: I love the concept in your work of eco-delic plants being not just tools, but evolutionary partners. Can you go into the mutual benefits of that partnership and how they seduce us? How did they seduce you?

RD: It's important to realize we're using language when we do this and that language only approximates the situation in the context. Some language works better than others; it's more authentic. It's all right to say I decided to go down to Peru to and drink Ayahuasca to explore the scholarly topic of Ayahuasca tourism in 2002, but you'd completely miss the point of what was going on, and the subjective feeling which was part of the healing I underwent.

One of the thrills of my intellectual academic teaching work so far was to be responded to by the great biologist Lynn Margolis at a talk she gave here. Margolis more or less single-handedly described in the 1960s the theory of endosymbiosis, which explains how a mitochondria in a human cell is a leftover trace of "the long bacterial embrace." The evolution of a nucleated cell was itself the outcome of a mutualist deal struck by bacteria. One bacteria invades another bacteria and over time some of that bacteria work it out, so they can cohabit and form a nucleated cell and the prokaryotic and eukaryotic domains are thus born. So this mutualism and the ecstasy(?) of symbiosis in evolution is beyond dispute, and we need to adjust our paradigms accordingly. Mutualism is a fundamental driving force of evolution, and one that Margolis argued convincingly with her son, Dorian Sagan, is more powerful than what we understand as natural selection in the Darwinian sense.

Of course, there's natural selection and sexual selection, then Margolis and Sagan try, in a speculative vein, to see the way in which Gaia might select for such symbiotic outcomes, and by Gaia, Margolis meant the whole Earth system. You put that next to the testimony of a great psychedelic scientist who, in the acknowledgments of *Darwin's Pharmacy*, I nominated for a not-yet-existent award, which I hereby ask any capitalists who are funding psychedelic startups to consider funding as well. That would be the Shulgin, [named for Alexander Shulgin], which is the award for psychonautical research, and give it to the McKenna Brothers, Dennis and Terrence. Dennis remains a great contributor in that classic sense of the scientist practitioner, in the lineage of people like Richard Evans Schultes at Harvard. He talks about ayahuasca as a symbiotic ally of the human species... and you can say he must mean that as a figure of speech. [But] as soon as we make that mistake we forget that the egoic "I" itself is an unexamined figure of speech. If you go to the doctor and ask them to show you your ego, they won't be able to find it. This allegedly indubitable sense of I-ness has been shown to be a special effect of a certain

aspect of the brain, the posterior cingulate cortex. It's just an effect, like the taste of orange soda; it's not our true nature.

JM: I'm thinking of something I read about tribes that had terms for "I" or the equivalent, by which they would be referring not only to themselves, but to their tribe and the land they lived on.

RD: Or you have the Rastas with "I and I," a grammatical formulation to remind us that every time we say "I," we're really saying "I and I," because there is always an other brought into being with that separation. That separation is not more real than our connections with each other, so the models of symbiosis illuminate ways in which cooperative behavior exists widespread in nature. Once we start with that context, and say there's a robust framework for understanding how symbiotic partnerships emerge in an evolutionary context, then we can look at the co-evolution of human beings and plants, just as we can look at the unmistakable coevolution of flowering plants and insects: you don't have one without the other. Once we put plants into the context of deep-time human experience, we know their omnipresence in the human toolkit, rather than excising them as bad old intoxicants that those other primitive, non-techno-scientifically sophisticated beings without models of mechanistic causality used, we can talk about how we would explore such a relationship between humans and plants.

You asked how they seduced me. We seduce each other, by giving each other attention. One of the lamentable things about the way medicalization and some decriminalization has occurred in the US is that many of us do not have the right to grow medicine. You think that's trivial; you can go to a dispensary and get certified, grown-by-union-labor, organic, kind bud that's got its genome scanned... What that doesn't give you is the well-tested experience of a dialogue with the plant, a relationship with the plant, that is necessary for the cultivation. You can just look up instructions and get your hydroponic gear, but if you're going to get the plant to thrive... DJ Short, a cannabis breeder who helped breed the blueberry strain, writes about it beautifully, that there's this kind of dance between the cultivator and the plant, where the lines blur in who's really growing who. I break that down in *Darwin's Pharmacy* as the feedback loop between smoking a plant and growing it. You're using the smoking of a plant as the principle of selection for the plants that you're going to breed together, so right there we see the way in which human consciousness, stoned consciousness, is intervening in the evolutionary pathway of this plant.

On our side, there's an array of healing properties that different strains of cannabis can offer, all the different terpene profiles and all the cannabinoids. And of all the adjustments, most important probably is the set and setting. We're exploring the state of all possible cannabis experiences together, and that's a highly healing and symbiotic enterprise. This practice of growing and eating the plants and humbling ourselves before the plants helps us rethink what and who we are, to imagine we're interacting with a sentient being, despite our culture's bizarre allergy to recognizing the agency of plants. I couldn't take a breath right now without 200 plants somewhere producing that oxygen. You can look to the contemporary science of plant signaling and behavior and be bedazzled [by] an incredible field of information being synthesized and fed back into the growing of the plant itself, so it's very reasonable to interact with plants as if they were minded beings, just as we implicitly, automatically interact with a dog or a cat... Automatically your brain starts to get a sense that things are a more webby, less discreet, where

everything is more of a continuum. Despite what our senses tell us, plants are sentient beings, with which we can have experimental relations with, just as we can with other human beings—and some philosophers never tire of pointing out you can never prove another person was conscious.

JM: How language shapes our reality is something I feel very invested in as a writer and poet, so I wonder how we can integrate that language of animacy about more than just humans and certain animals. To penetrate the hierarchies that have a strangle hold on a lot of information, and get past that internalized fear, that skeptical resistance, of investors, employers, researchers, rolling their eyes if you talk openly about plant intelligence.

RD: I well understand. It was with lightning speed that it was no longer cool to make jokes about our gay colleagues. There is a bigoted residue of egoic consciousness that, the minute it feels threatened, rolls its eyes... It's interesting, we want psychedelics without the hippies, because we would have to admit that we were wrong, and that the secular left sacrificed the spiritual left. There's a whole history and a whole strange trip we'd rather not revisit. The good news is, when it looked impossible that anything like cannabis legalization could happen, there was this phrase of "overgrow the government"—the bottom-up solution.

We don't need to penetrate any hierarchies—those hierarchies exist as parasites taking credit for what's happening entirely from the bottom-up. We can roll up on a plot of land, harvest everything from it, and say it's ours, but it's been the bottom-up process of evolution for three-and-a-half billion years. It's not De Beers that is making the diamonds. Working from the inside-out and bottom-up has to be a DIY process of awakening, where a critical mass of people recognize and integrate the truth of our interaction and interconnection with plants, and live that life on that basis in an everyday way. By being healed of that wound of the I, even a little bit, we start to live a life that is in accord with the reality of our interconnection, as opposed to the panicked insistence on our separation, and the way in which those hierarchies reproduce themselves, by producing more and more egos. I think we're up to nearly 8 billion now?

It's an interesting thought experiment: what happens if you get 10 out of 330 million people living a life according to not the false idol of ego, but their experience of radical interconnection with each other and with the Earth? I think we got a glimpse of what that looks like, say from 1964 to 1972. It's a time of breathtaking change and technological innovation and a new compact with the Earth in the form of Earth Day, even if it's just a symbol, and the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, and all these things that came from a large swath of a generation engaging on this learning path.

I'm not saying that's all that was going on, but it's going to be interesting to watch the historians go in. I don't think they can be fully trusted in this story either, because it's been a complete accomplice in the demonization of transpersonal experience, the knowing eyeroll at anything to do with the counterculture, in part because of the firing—actually quitting—of Timothy Leary. There was a wound because tenure is this sacred thing, and Timothy Leary lost his job for playing with psychedelics. But he left the academy because he had had a metanoia experience and could no longer really function within the ossified norms, nor could Richard Albert, then Ram Dass. The intelligentsia let us down too, so maybe we need that history and healing to be

bottom-up as well. There's lots of wisdom that can be gathered from the elders of that generation who have been through a lot of psychedelic experience, not just on their own, but guiding others. That's starting to happen, but the psychedelic experience also involves by hook or by crook, some kind of a taking responsibility—well, there I've gone and done it. That responsibility extends to the integration and manifestation of those experiences as well. I've been gifted with this healing, how am I going to manifest that gift into the world? How do I live now, on the other side of that? You have an experience where consciousness is, but there's no sense of I, of time or space. If you can observe that often enough, you're no longer going to really live in a society according to these norms by which such a phantasm is a real problem.

What is the internet but an infinite mirror of those egoic phantasms? What has to go along with our humble and practiced investigation of psychedelic states, should we be called by such states, is a general strike against the attention economy, which insists on our reality as egoic beings and is feasting off our attention while it sells us back images of ourselves as separate beings, which we are not. [I]t's amazing that it doesn't seem that anyone anywhere is recommending anything but regulating big tech—nobody says, “turn the s*** off.” You don't need social media. Social media is an oxymoron; it's neither social, nor really kind of a palpable media. And nothing changes everything just comes into existence and goes out of existence. [This awakening] is not going to be through Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. [These] are ontological programmers of our consciousness that convince us we're certain kinds of beings, and we exist in order to allow our attention to be feasted upon by Alphabet and Meta. Is that really what you signed up for?

JM: Can you make any distinction between the social web and the rest of the web, a nonhierarchical and non-capitalist web, if still a mirror of our interconnectedness?

RD: I would never say never...but for most people, they need to turn that s*** off, and that's the last thing that they'll ever hear. To turn off, at the very least, social media; turn off broadcast news; turn off print journalism; turn off publishing industry, without giving into the tasty conspiratorial nuggets that are dangled from that very same platform by the likes of Joe Rogan, etc. It doesn't mean you replace the attention economy with another attention economy, which is conspiracy theory. It means you turn away from that as a dominant mode of your activity. You radically dwindle the number of information events during your day that don't involve active dialogue with another person.

JM: If the egoic tendencies and the attention economy are both kind of parasitic, it can have this inverse, of a backlash to the initial thing that is feeding off of your attention. Now I'm so strongly against the thing, that I'm still devoting all of my attention to the thing.

RD: It's straight out of Hegel. Egoic consciousness will find a way to integrate this totally other, alien kind of machine into itself and sell back the experiences to whoever will buy them. I want to make clear that capitalism is what it is. We can easily imagine things other than capitalism, but we can also observe that the enraged insistence by human beings that we can decide how to regulate markets hasn't worked out very well. Markets would appear to be, at some level, as difficult to control as meteorological events, so the question is not so much whether or not we're going to have something like capitalism; it's whether or not capitalism rules the roost, and disappears any other way of valuing the Earth. That's where it becomes a blight, not just an

infrastructure for the exchange of things at a distance and the invention of forms of property that we take too seriously, but which could be useful tools.

I think we protest too much sometimes. I never meant to suggest with my colleagues in *Dark Side* that capitalism could somehow ruin psychedelics. But it can initiate a repetitious bad trip, where we once again avoid discovering the purloined truth hidden in plain sight: that that egoic tie is but a phantom, and if we wish to stop our suffering, we can engage in practices that mitigate said suffering and try to thrive to a much greater extent than we currently thrive based on our material economic factors that we've developed through. We are accumulating more and more wealth, and fewer and fewer people own it, and the whole machine seems to require mass suffering in order to keep it going. I emphasize "seem" there, because I think turning on, tuning in, and dropping out again would very well reacquaint people with the fertility and fecundity of a much simpler kind of life. I think bikes are as important as psychedelics to this awakening myself, because self-locomotion is magic. When you put yourself in a context in which you're moved and outsourcing your own motion it seems to do something to our sense of agency.

JM: Talking about not being able to stomach computers, I've had the same experience with cars in the past couple of years.

RD: Me too! I couldn't get into a car without kicking and screaming, post-being healed of asthma by Ayahuasca in 2002. [Riding a bike] you start to perceive how much of not only infrastructure but consensus reality is given over to producing the implied, always-available car. Getting free of that a little bit is a beautiful experience. It's a metaphysical change. It shouldn't surprise us that not being in car consciousness is itself a kind of psychedelic experience, in the sense that your mind truly manifests and expands the amount of sensory experience you have. It's what Ivan Illich called a convivial technology. What starts to happen is that psychedelic experience becomes the Big Bang of this Awakening. It's neither necessary nor sufficient for many of us, but what brings it all together is this learning path of life beyond ego.

JM: [On the issue of egoic gatekeeping], a lot of scientific academia is based upon insisting upon control and objectivity, taking for granted the perspective of context we bring to whatever our experiences are. So how can we distinguish between the open-source versus privatized norms to access these ways of being, specifically ecodelics?

RD: [Again], we need to grow them and eat them, and as we grow them and eat them we need to share what works in our own paths. In that article we point to open source standards akin to technical standards. We're good at assembling standards for technical systems, so everything is interoperable. When it comes to things like mindfulness or meditation, we have all these competing schools, and you have monopolistic competition. It's not so bad within Buddhism, but there's a tendency we have as a culture to other every other path to healing and awakening besides our own. My accost of mindfulness was that a lot of that was itself part of that blind peer-reviewed subprocess that struggles to become intellectual property. The blind peer review is great; let's do that. But the generation of protocols where people are trying to patent different ways of contextualizing the psychedelic experience, listening to music in headphones, are just barriers to innovation and experimentation that is not cognizant of the nature of psychedelic experiences itself. Psychedelic experience lends itself to this kind of DIY, carefully considered

experimentation with the self, on the self. [Erowid](#) is a beautiful example of an open-source treasury of knowledge that anybody could tap into when they're interested in these plants. [Ayahuasca Forums](#), [the Shroomery](#), all these old school boards had communities within them that did a lot of good. But a lot of those get crapped out by this big alliance of the official psychedelic science.

I would differentiate, first and foremost, that open-sourced formats are free to be shared with attribution, to make sure they're not altered without a kind of blockchain, which would be smart to put these protocols on a blockchain so you couldn't change them. We're just starting to assemble free and open-access information of the sort that the psychedelic community has always promoted, maybe because the nature of psychedelic experiences wants to be shared. We're all occupying our own points of view and historic, karmic, biophysical circumstances, but sharing those insights is how we're likely to take advantage. [Linus's law, named in honor of Linus Torvalds] says, "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow," meaning open source code can be easily fixed, because everybody could look at it. By sharing all the different protocols and procedures and contacts as best we can, then any other individual is that much more likely to have a healing, efficacious experience. I'm not against anyone making money, but I think if we could have a kind of open-source backbone, we'd be able to separate what works from what doesn't.

Without naming names, some very large research universities have started programs to teach psychedelic facilitators that are mostly online classes, and then they participate in three or four experiences when someone ingest psilocybin in a controlled context... That's really not a shamanic apprenticeship. The people who I might ever drink Ayahuasca with have all studied for at least 10 years. This may be psilocybin, not Ayahuasca, but I think we're fooling ourselves if we think we can come up with a quick and dirty way of having an approved pathway for psychedelic facilitators. I think by stepping away and decriminalizing, letting people do it themselves and sharing the open-source results, we're likely to do less harm and less likely to fool ourselves into thinking we're experts. [When it comes to entheogenic plants], nobody I know and I trust ever thinks they're an expert. The very thing people find attractive about taking psychedelics in a scientifically controlled setting is that it means nothing can go wrong. That's science as set and setting. If that's what somebody wants to do, that's great, but it introduces a false view of what psychedelics are.

Another great pioneer, Richard Strassman, back in '92 did DMT studies at the University of New Mexico. At the apex of the drug war, he gets to administer DMT to 27 volunteers. That's the other thing this so-called psychedelic renaissance erases: there were people doing this work. It's just that *The New York Times* didn't pick up on it; there wasn't a big influencing machine behind it. This post-new age, professionally awakened transhumanist culture hadn't decided they were going to live forever inside some kind of psychedelic peacock.

That's why I say, don't legalize it; decriminalize it. Stop valorizing it so much. I get contacted by people who have read Michael Pollan's book and want to take psilocybin, and I say no, you really shouldn't. The fact that people decided it's okay and exciting now to take psychedelics is not a good reason for you to take them now. Part of the taking responsibility for a psychedelic experience is to take responsibility for where, how, and why, so the fact that it's cool now is probably the worst reason in the world to engage in this. A lot of people I know who shied away

from it in the past are now going to ceremony after ceremony, and they are shocked at what hard work it is. To me, that means that we're not doing a very good job of full disclosure.

JM: It's being marketed.

RD: And in being marketed, we're giving a false and fuzzy view. If you get out of ecodelics what they can offer, you're going to be healed of your former self, and we have to let people know what that means. It's not going to be just like you're who you were before, only better; there's a part of you that is going to fall away.

JM: There's a tendency to use it as a self-improvement tool, when we have our own definitions of what self-improvement is. Like I can come to it thinking, "I want to be a better writer," but those narrow terms limits it, turns it into a product.

RD: We have not freed ourselves from the productivity virus. That's the real root virus, that there's something we need to do to deserve the universe's love. By being productive and healthy and happy as represented in our Instagram accounts, eating the right things and never doing the wrong thing to another person and emitting the appropriate virtue signals, we're still on the same hamster wheel. What a company man in the sixties was is now...

JM: An influencer.

RD: I don't say that to be critical of anyone necessarily; it's just not a path to liberation. It may well be a path to short-term commodification of something you can squeeze a million out of and get that loathsome phrase, "passive income." Shouldn't we be ashamed of passive income? Shouldn't something occur that gives rise to the wealth we then extract?

JM: There's an imposter syndrome that comes with just being rewarded without any kind of doing on your own, which is almost the essence of white guilt.

Speaking of, you mentioned all coming to this with our own karmic background. What are the best practices and policies in advocating for these plants in an intuitive, grassroots way, yet still respecting the indigenous traditions? Like acknowledging one may be an expert by a certain perspective, but still not compared to the intergenerational traditions we're appropriating and approximating now.

RD: I like what [Decriminalize Nature](#) people have been doing, because the emphasis is simply on decriminalization and respect. It's not that nobody's allowed to have access to cannabis if they're not from the right lineage; one of my favorite shamans is a white girl from Montana. As soon as we use some supposedly scientifically superior method for interacting with psychedelics as the legitimate way, we either explicitly or implicitly other these ways of interacting with psychedelics that are actually thousands of years old and well established for how to use these plant medicines for healing, as opposed to how to establish what the causal mechanism is of a psychedelic molecule.

Nobody owns this, so the march towards proprietary knowledge is not going to work, no matter how hard these different companies work at coming up with a form of psilocybin you don't get high off of but still heals you and so forth. Really, do you think you're going to be able to compete with a bag of mycelium in your closet and a room full of people who know how to guide the experience, before you move on and reflect in your own way? Not to mention the healthcare state is broken—how can we expect it to generate appointments for people to get healed psychedelically when it takes weeks to get a CPAP machine? There's no way that that's going to be able to do the job that simply clicking on a cart on Amazon, getting a mycelium box you can inoculate with spores, and consulting with someone who's had more than a handful of journeys can do. We can scale that up rapidly. You could say it's going to be subject to abuse. Yes, every such system is going to have charlatans and bad actors. I'm trying to remember if those are absent in the scientific sphere or not...? In other words, we can't pretend just because it's more scientific, it's going to be somehow more conducive to harm reduction; it'll be more conducive to liability limitation.

JM: The illusion of infallibility almost makes the fallibility more acute. Something that stood out to me [from *Dark Side of the Shroom*] was the example of one of the research subjects feeling pressured to report positive results, and having such high expectations that the fact that [psilocybin] wasn't the magic pill they expected made their sense of inadequacy even worse.

RD: Isn't that heart-rending? I don't ascribe any bad faith on the part of the researchers, but once universities and industry partners line up and the venture capital starts to swirl, it's not likely to be the best outcome. We can reinvent psychedelic culture on our own now for the 20th century and the culture we live in. I think what people are doing with microdosing is beautiful. If you feel like your life has no space to take 4 to 6 hours out for a journey, and we live in such an anxious and panic-stricken culture that understandably people perhaps tremble before a full-blown psychedelic experience. But each of us can only take responsibility as adults if we have access to free and impartial information, and we're not subject to criminalization for it. There's a reason why, back in 2004, one of the first decisions of the Roberts Supreme Court was that an ayahuasca church in New Mexico had the right to pour ayahuasca for its members—because freedom of religion, freedom to have a sacred experience, is what we're talking about here, and that freedom is often eclipsed by the narrative that, “of course this time around it'll be medical.”

In my sense, [the state should] step away from trying to regulate that space; merely engage in practices of harm reduction. Now, how's that going to work out on a policy level? That's a really interesting question. [W]e need to build policy that allows for bottom-up healing, which sounds like a non-sequitur, because we have such an assumed monopoly of medicine that we call anything else “alternative medicine.” We're seeing the cracks in that post-pandemic, so I think... the prescription is simple: step away from criminalization; step away from commodification and proprietary knowledge-building. It doesn't have to become “the next big thing.” I wrote in 2017, when New Mexico quietly made [possession of] psilocybin mushrooms legal, everybody in the state didn't start eating mushrooms, and that's the thing we can ultimately trust. Anything that is illicit people do, just like kids eating Tide pods five or six years ago or people killing themselves on motorcycles. Self-abuse is going to occur, unfortunately.

JM: You can't suppress the human self-destructive tendency.

RD: It hasn't worked so far. So don't make it a felony—start with psilocybin. Make it an understandable option for someone coming of age, if they feel called. Aldous Huxley's last novel *The Island* featured a multi-generational liberation ceremony. Different cultures will decide how to integrate it, or not integrate it, into their own practice, but as a sacred ceremony, I don't think the state is in any position to decide what is valid or what is not valid. The reason the UDV (União do Vegetal), the church in question, won was that the Religious Restoration Act from 1994 imposes a very high bar for the state [to prove they have] an interest in the circulation of ayahuasca. [They would have to be] protecting it from falling into the wrong hands, such as that of children... That is a lot more complicated than just backing slowly away from prohibition. That didn't work, so let's try being slightly less insane about this—not claiming that mushrooms are going to solve mental health, which is what many pundits are claiming, but we can say they are worthy medicines to be explored with care and humility, and let's let that unfold.

JM: [I]ntegrating is just something that will happen little by little, out of control. In our collective states and as individual bodies, [we can] make more room to acknowledge the subconscious and unknown. We can have spaces in which we don't need to be intentional or have the sense of control, to let things unfold naturally. They may eventually be integrated into the spaces that we do regulate, but you always need in the creative process places that are without boundary.

RD: Yes. And we will have best practices. Cannabis is a case in point... If you just want to turn them into another consumer item, that's fine too, but we can at least have the opportunity of realizing this is actually a very powerful medicine. How can we do a better job teaching people how to smoke weed? Because the plant is so much more capacious than most of our use would seem to indicate. I'm not trying to be a cannabis snob, but observing that I had to learn how to work with that plant... I'm tempted to say that anyone who is using cannabis without meditation is not getting what they can get out of cannabis. Paired together they're beautiful complimentary practices... By working with low doses of the right strain and having a daily meditation practice of 35 minutes or more, you open up profound spaces of healing. [But] having a less is more approach to cannabis... is not in the interest of the industry. The industry wants to sell you as much as possible and tends to valorize the high THC content, which is really just the old paradigm stuff. There's some correlation between THC and the experience, but it's not a straight input-output situation.

To pair ecodelic practices with a meditation practices, including cannabis and psychedelics...is what happened in the 60s more-or-less organically. People had psychedelic experiences that didn't map onto this kind of Cartesian Western worldview, even if we don't know that it's a Cartesian Western worldview, and we find [ourselves] liking some of the Buddhist Sutra ways we didn't know before. So as these states start to get reintroduced, we've so overly branded ecodelic experience that a lot of people don't know these are available with cannabis. It's a sacred plant for many of us, a sacrament and a medicine.

Do you notice how psychedelics kind of replaced meditation as the article du jour the influencing machine is propagating? For a while we were hearing a bunch about meditation and how it was going to reduce daily stress. I'm not trying to be cynical, but this marketing machine is familiar

in how it works. [So] I would be just as suspicious of the psychedelic hype machine as I would of anything else. What Theodore Adorno called the “culture industry” is just as capable of working with psychedelic culture as it is with any other culture, so I would go to it with a sense of optimism but also calling B.S. Maybe innovation is not what's called for; maybe psychedelics aren't just a new software platform.

I think the solution is simple, but the momentum is enormous. We always kind of knew some big psychedelic wave was going to come eventually. I think it's smart to get involved, but I would let yourself get involved in it from the inside out. It's kind of amazing that psychedelics are peaking while you see many stories about the extinction of the humanities, so the actual study of subjective experience that psychedelics can occasion is resurging. The answers are always from the inside out and from the bottom up.