



CHANGING OUR MINDS

PSYCHEDELIC SACRAMENTS AND
THE NEW PSYCHOTHERAPY

DON LATTIN

AUTHOR OF "THE HARVARD PSYCHEDELIC CLUB"

Praise for *Changing Our Minds*

“Accurate, Comprehensive, and Powerful; If you want to understand the responsible use of psychedelics and feel its pulse, this book is for you.”

—William A. Richards, PhD, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Author,
Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences

“Don Lattin’s *Changing Our Minds* is far and away the best book on psychedelic use and research available today. Although I’m supposed to know all this stuff, my copy is cluttered with underlinings, the margins speckled with exclamation points and emoji, and the front empty pages filled with notations of why I need to return to numerous pages. Through a combination of personal friendships, experiencing what he’s writing about, and just plain old-fashioned superior journalism, Lattin not only fully describes the important trends in research, but includes valuable back stories of the major researchers, and why they have given so much of their professional lives to such risky endeavors. Now, when people ask me, is there one book I can read about the multiple dimensions of current psychedelic research, I can say, *Changing Our Minds* will give you everything you need.”

—James Fadiman, PhD, author of *The Psychedelic Explorer’s Guide: Safe, Therapeutic and Sacred Journeys*

“Don Lattin has done compassionate service by bringing together the current work on the profound potential of psychedelics to treat addiction, fear of death, and physical and mental struggles. It has taken years, but now researchers are able to use these methods to inquire into some of our most challenging issues, including, in fact, what it means to be human. This riveting report of these diverse explorations will certainly encourage others to expand the field.”

—Mirabai Bush, Senior Fellow, Center for Contemplative Mind in Society

“Don Lattin tells the amazing stories about the rise of psychedelics, their benefits, and their colorful and inspiring champions, all the while retaining his journalistic voice. *Changing Our Minds* will be an important reference for generations to come.”

—Allan Badiner, Author and Activist,
Coeditor, *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*

“*Changing our Minds* is both a great read with flowing prose and a highly-referenced and comprehensive history of the recent resurgence of psychedelic research. Don goes directly to the sources here, capturing rare and detailed first-hand accounts from all the leaders in this growing endeavor.”

—George Greer, MD, Cofounder and
Medical Director, Heffter Research Institute

“*Changing Our Minds* expertly explores the healing and spiritual journey catalyzed by psychedelic psychotherapy through the courageous voices of those who are pioneering the study of these treatments. An essential read for those interested in the expanding field of psychedelic research for therapeutic and spiritual uses, this volume lands at a crucial time during the re-emergence of psychedelic research as we approach the mainstream, scientific acceptance of psychedelic psychotherapy and the reintegration of the legal use of psychedelics into Western culture.”

—Rick Doblin, PhD, MAPS Founder and Executive Director

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DON LATTIN



SYNERGETICPRESS

Santa Fe & London

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Dedicated to the usual suspects . . .

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A pill does not construct character, educate the emotions, or improve intelligence. It is not a spiritual labor-saving device, salvation, instant wisdom, or a shortcut to maturity. However, it can be an opportunity to experience oneself and the world in a new way—and to learn from it.

LSD researcher Sidney Cohen, looking back
on the first wave of psychedelic research in the 1950s and early 1960s
From *The Beyond Within: The LSD Story*

INTRODUCTION

PSYCHEDELIC DRUGS ARE BACK. Not that they ever really went away. You could always find them on the street, in the dance clubs, at the festivals, and on the more enlightened edge of the drug culture. Since the 1960s, when governments around the world started passing laws banning the use of powerful psychoactive compounds like LSD and mescaline, underground networks of spiritual teachers, psychedelic psychotherapists and millions of others have risked arrest and quietly continued using an array of mind-altering agents to inspire spiritual insight, promote mental health, or to simply have a good time. Drugs like psilocybin, the active ingredient in “magic mushrooms,” and MDMA, a.k.a. “Ecstasy” or “Molly,” remain illegal on the street and by prescription. Nevertheless, they are already seen as “medicines” by rising numbers of people—not just as “recreational drugs” or drugs of abuse.

In recent years, university administrators, government regulatory agencies and private donors have begun giving the stamp of approval and the money needed for new and expanding research into the use of MDMA and psilocybin as tools to help therapists treat patients suffering from a variety of psychological conditions. What’s new is how these consciousness-raising substances are finally coming out of the counterculture and the drug culture and into the mainstream laboratories of some of the world’s leading universities and medical centers. Scientists and psychotherapists are probing their psychic properties and healing powers. Advances in the neurosciences and the new imaging technology now enable researchers to map the psychedelic brain in real time, deepening our understanding of the nature—and the ongoing mystery—of human consciousness.

In 2017, two organizations leading the psychedelic psychotherapy revolution are set to begin a final round of clinical trials in which hundreds of new

patients with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and severe anxiety would undergo therapy sessions fueled by MDMA and psilocybin. Scientists and donors affiliated with those organizations, the Heffter Research Institute and the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), have formed and funded two new organizations that plan to bring those psychoactive compounds out of the research lab and into the medical mainstream.

Meanwhile, a new generation of spiritual seekers has rediscovered the transformative power of psychedelic plants. Holding center stage in this shamanic revival is ayahuasca, a bitter tea brewed from two plants native to the Amazonian basin. In the United States, the ayahuasca gospel is preached on two fronts. The first is through an underground network led by teachers trained by shamanic healers south of the border. The second front is a missionary movement launched by two Brazilian churches that use ayahuasca in their religious rites. They have established congregations in the United States that, under the limited protection of a recent Supreme Court ruling, can legally dispense this psychedelic communion in their ceremonies.

Changing Our Minds explores a transformational movement that advocates the use of mind-altering plants and medicines to promote mental health and spiritual growth. It is part of a larger shift in Western culture of people searching for new ways to connect mind, body, and spirit. Some seekers make these conscious connections through meditation, yoga, chanting, drumming, ecstatic dance and deep breathing techniques. Others prefer LSD, ayahuasca, Ecstasy, magic mushrooms, or various combinations of any or all of the above.

What's happening in many of these circles is the coming together of psychology and spirituality. Even the self-proclaimed secularists in the psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy movement employ rituals that draw from Native American shamanism and the sacramental rites of the Roman Catholic Church. Atheists pound on drums and ring Tibetan Buddhist bells. Medical doctors present MDMA and psilocybin pills to patients with the hushed decorum of Orthodox priests.

Advocates of both the therapeutic and the spiritual use of psychedelics are already celebrating the start of the "post-Prohibition era." That party may be a bit premature, but the government crackdown in the 1970s and 1980s on scientific research and personal use of psychedelic drugs has certainly declined. Marijuana may be the model for changing attitudes and public policies about LSD, magic mushrooms, Ecstasy and other psychedelic drugs. On the cannabis front, that shift was a state-by-state decriminalization of medicinal marijuana followed by full legalization in some states.

In the United States, the first wave of psychedelic drug research—secretly funded by the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States Army—began in Boston in 1949, just six years after a Swiss chemist, Albert Hofmann, accidentally discovered the powerful psychoactive effects of a drug he had synthesized and labeled LSD-25. U.S. intelligence reports in 1951 revealing that the Soviets had purchased 50 million doses of LSD from Hofmann’s employer, Sandoz Laboratories, kicked off a decade of bizarre and sometimes horrific U.S.-sponsored research into the use of psychedelics as chemical weapons. News of this clandestine research only began to emerge in the 1970s. One of my first major stories as a young San Francisco journalist detailed how one of these tests, dubbed Operation Third Chance, destroyed the life of a United States soldier who was falsely accused of being a spy, given massive doses of LSD, and “interrogated in a hostile environment.”¹

Fortunately, much of the early psychedelic research had more altruistic intentions. In the 1950s and 1960s, more than a thousand research papers were written about LSD, psilocybin, and other psychedelic drugs. Some 40,000 research subjects were given these mind-expanding agents, and great progress was made in the understanding of how they might help people suffering from depression, alcoholism, and the psycho-spiritual distress that often comes with the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. Theologians and psychologists studied how psychedelic drugs could inspire creativity and evoke life-changing mystical experiences in healthy volunteers.

By 1963, the psychedelic genie was out of the bottle, having escaped from the carefully controlled domain of the researcher’s laboratory and psycho-therapist’s office. Millions of Baby Boomers were coming of age and starting to experiment on their own with LSD, magic mushrooms, peyote and other hallucinogens. On the East Coast, a charismatic Harvard University psychologist named Timothy Leary reinvented himself as the “high priest” of the psychedelic counterculture. In California, a promising novelist named Ken Kesey gathered a Dionysian troupe of Merry Pranksters and put on a series of huge parties called “Acid Tests,” where revelers dosed themselves and danced to a new band called the Grateful Dead.

Then the backlash came. In the early 1960s, government regulators tightened rules governing academic and medical research into new drugs. In 1966, LSD was outlawed in California, the epicenter of the psychedelic counterculture,

¹ Lattin, 1977

and possession became a federal crime in 1968. In 1970, a new federal law ignored the findings of research scientists and declared LSD and psilocybin medically useless and easy to abuse, making new university and medical studies exceedingly difficult.

“LSD was an immensely valuable compound for medicine and psychiatry, but it was unfairly stigmatized by the cultural revolution of the 1960s,” said longtime psychedelic activist Amanda Feilding, the founder of the Beckley Foundation, which supports scientific research into mind-altering substances and seeks to reform global drug policy. “Timothy Leary left a legacy of making LSD almost untouchable.”²

In 1977, a young psychedelic researcher in Baltimore named William A. Richards supervised what turned out to be the last government-funded dosing of volunteer subjects for nearly twenty years. The dark ages of psychedelic drug research had begun.

On a summer day in 2015, an older Bill Richards stood before a sold-out auditorium at a San Francisco college to deliver a lecture titled “Frontiers of Psychedelic Research.” Most of those in the audience were not alive fifty years ago, in 1965, when the LSD was dumped in the Kool-Aid across town for Kesey’s first Acid Test. Some of the young adults in the crowd were about to enroll in a new program at the college, the California Institute of Integral Studies, which would soon be training the next generation of therapists hoping to legally use psychedelic drugs in their helping professions.

Richards, who was back on the ground floor of the new wave of psychedelic research at Johns Hopkins University in the late 1990s, was in a celebratory mood on this summer night. “Psychedelic research has gone through an incredible process of death and rebirth,” he said. “This is an inspiring, hopeful time.”

Changing Our Minds explores the scientific renaissance and the shamanic revival of psychoactive substances—legal and illegal, therapeutic and spiritual. It focuses on groundbreaking research now being sponsored by Heffter and MAPS. These government-approved clinical trials are being conducted by scientists affiliated with Johns Hopkins, Purdue, New York University, UCLA, the University of New Mexico and other institutes of higher learning. Other studies—also sanctioned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)—are underway by freelance

² Interview with Amanda Feilding, Nov. 29, 2016

psychedelic researchers in Colorado, South Carolina, Northern California and elsewhere. Promising early results have been released and more are expected in the coming years using psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), addiction, and the crippling depression and anxiety that can accompany autism or a life-threatening illness.

Nearly all of this research has been privately funded. Government agencies affiliated with the National Institutes of Health—especially the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institute on Drug Abuse—are reluctant to support human research that employs banned psychoactive drugs such as LSD, psilocybin, and MDMA. So, money to support MAPS and Heffter has been mostly raised through email and Internet campaigns; and at intimate gatherings where psychedelic scientists sip white wine and share hors d'oeuvres with potential donors.

At one such reception in the exclusive Sea Cliff neighborhood in San Francisco, Dave Nichols, the president and cofounder of the Heffter Research Institute, stood before a white marble fireplace in the home of George Sarlo, a philanthropist and psychedelic science supporter. If San Francisco's fundraising venues are rated by their views of the Golden Gate Bridge, the scene from Sarlo's spacious living room is right up there with the most spectacular. Some of the wealthiest and most loyal backers of psychedelic research are drawn from the ranks of California venture capitalists and the high-tech elite in San Francisco and nearby Silicon Valley, and a few of them were present at this event. It was a crisp sunny day in the fall of 2015. The fog had burned off by the mid-afternoon and the future looked bright.

"You are here at a historic moment," said Nichols. "We are on the verge of a paradigm shift in the practice of psychiatry."

Nichols then introduced three of the world's leading psychedelic scientists. Swiss researcher Franz Vollenweider had flown in from Zurich to discuss his research using the latest imaging technology to understand how the brain works on psychedelic drugs. Stephen Ross, the director of the New York University Psychedelic Research Group, talked about his work with alcoholics and cancer patients struggling with severe anxiety and depression. Roland Griffiths had come to California from Baltimore for an update on his studies at Johns Hopkins comparing psychedelic-induced mysticism to the religious experiences of Buddhist meditators and Christian clerics.

Griffiths and Ross were the lead authors in two landmark papers simultaneously published the following year, in December 2016. Each study clearly showed

how psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy could reduce psychological illness and existential distress among cancer patients with a life-threatening diagnosis.

Ross led an NYU team that studied 29 patients and found that a single dose of synthesized magic mushroom medicine produced “immediate, substantial, and sustained improvements in anxiety and depression.” Scientific surveys of the patients also found that the psychedelic treatment, compared to the same therapy with a placebo pill, “improved spiritual well-being and increased quality of life.”³

Ross told me in an interview that half of the New York volunteers going into the study described themselves as agnostics or atheists, and half had some kind of religious affiliation. But roughly equal numbers in both groups had experiences that could be described as “mystical.”

“People describe being in touch with awe-inspiring elements, with something sacred. They describe a sense of infinite love, a sense of peace, humility, being transported back into their lives,” said Ross, an associate professor in the NYU Department of Psychiatry. “They described a sense of internal and external oneness.”⁴

This can be especially helpful for people hit with a life-threatening diagnosis. Previous studies have found that between 30 and 40 percent of cancer patients in hospital settings endure clinically significant levels of depression and severe anxiety.

The second study, conducted by a team at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, compared a very low and moderately high dose of psilocybin administered with therapy to 51 cancer patients. “The high dose produced significantly greater ratings of positive persisting effects on attitudes about life and self, mood changes, social effects, behavior, and spirituality,” the researchers reported.⁵

All of this work, Griffiths told the potential donors gathered in Sarlo’s living room, has combined to “rehabilitate our culture’s appreciation of the value and safety of psychedelics” when used in controlled clinical settings. “We are seeing a sea change in public attitudes toward psychedelics,” he said.

George Greer, the Heffter medical director, hoped the FDA would grant “breakthrough status” for the final stages of research for cancer-related psilocybin therapy at Hopkins and NYU and other sites, and could offer expanded

³ Ross, Bossis, Guss, et al, 2016

⁴ Interview with Stephen Ross, Nov. 14, 2016

⁵ Griffiths, Johnson, et al, 2016

access in the third and final stage of the clinical trials. That could speed the long bureaucratic process leading to the FDA approving psilocybin so that specially trained doctors could prescribe it for the treatment of existential distress among patients with life-threatening diagnoses.

Greer, a New Mexico psychiatrist, was also optimistic that the FDA would be impressed with the data from Heffter-funded addiction research on psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy. “Our pilot studies with psilocybin also show effectiveness beyond what we imagined for people dependent on alcohol and nicotine,” he said.⁶

Some months later, on an equally clear day in 2016, another key meeting was held in George Sarlo’s spectacular living room. It was presided over by Rick Doblin, the tireless founder of MAPS, the other leading private sponsor of psychedelic drug research. While Heffter focuses on the FDA approval of psilocybin for clinical use, MAPS has poured even more money into research and corporate positioning designed to make it the exclusive legal distributor of MDMA in the early years of the coming psychedelic psychotherapy revolution.

Rick sat with his back against the bank of huge picture windows in the Sea Cliff home, looking into the living room at a circle of twenty people gathered on couches and chairs for the semi-annual meeting of the MAPS board of directors. Three of the four men who sit with Rick on his five-member board of directors were in attendance—three men who are also on the top-ten donor list. Outside, as a convoy of container cargo ships steamed under the Golden Gate Bridge and into San Francisco Bay, Doblin gave an upbeat financial report detailing how MAPS was ready to spend more than \$20 million over the next five years on the final phase of a thirty-year campaign to decriminalize MDMA.

Doblin has proven to be a master fundraiser, building MAPS into an organization with an effective support staff and wealthy donors. In an interview after the board meeting, Rick confessed that he was “getting more and more attached to beating Big Pharma, and beating Heffter, to market.” At the same time, Doblin made it clear his crusade is about much more than making money and marketing MDMA as a new medicine. The ultimate goal is the legalization of psychedelic drugs.

“It’s a fundamental infringement of human rights and religious freedom that they are illegal in the first place,” Rick told me. “Medicine is a very important

⁶ Interview with George Greer, July 13, 2015

stepping stone, but the end goal is social transformation and spirituality and liberation.”⁷

This coming psychedelic renaissance has its roots in both the laboratory and jungle. It is both scientific and shamanic.

Take, for example, the current ayahuasca craze. It grew out of the Amazonian basin, traveled through the Hawaiian Islands, and into shamanic circles spiraling across the United States—from brownstone apartments in Brooklyn, New York, to redwood sanctuaries in Mendocino, California. For members of emerging ayahuasca churches, harvesting the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* plant and the bark of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine is a way of cultivating a new understanding of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Brewing the tea is an alchemical means of transformation. Some drinkers of the tea talk about these plants having a kind of consciousness of their own. In a dysfunctional world threatened by toxic waste and climate change, they say, plants are the new prophets, showing us another way.

“Ayahuasca is a response to the planetary crisis, a message from Gaia,” said a man we’ll call “Matteo,” who leads ceremonial circles in Northern California. “Here is a substance that can clean you out and open you up to see the interconnected oneness of us all. This medicine comes from the Amazon basin, from the lungs of the planet. That place is a nonstop energy generator. These plants grow in that environment. Ayahuasca is a multi-dimensional being speaking to you on different levels. It has its own intelligence and wisdom—telling you what is important to look at.”

Some drinkers of the tea are confronted with mystical visions of bejeweled Byzantine cities, or nightmarish visions of horrifying monsters. For others, the tea is a kinder, gentler teacher, helping them to psychologically process and heal past traumas and tragedies, or to simply help them feel deeper love and gratitude toward other people in their lives. “People come in with expectations about really having their socks blown off because they read about all these extreme experiences, whether they’re glorifying or horrifying experiences,” Matteo told me. “But the medicine comes in and sees what’s needed for the person’s greatest good. If your intention is aligned with that it will give you something in line with your intention. If there is something more important, it will take you there and give you that.”⁸

⁷ Interview with Rick Doblin, Feb. 26, 2016

⁸ Interview with “Matteo,” March 20, 2014

In the shamanic circle, and in the research lab, explorations into the beneficial use of psychedelic plants and drugs inevitably lead to basic questions about the nature of human consciousness. Is this all happening inside our brain, or are we connecting with some cosmic force or higher power? Substances such as LSD and MDMA evoke feelings of transcendence, awe, and unity. They shatter the ego. And in the process, they have inspired some secular scientists to take a more open attitude toward the serious study of spiritual states and paranormal phenomena.

This book uses the term “psychedelic,” which means “mind manifesting,” to define a broad range of psychoactive substances. Drugs like DMT, the main mind-altering agent in ayahuasca, and psilocybin, what makes magic mushrooms magic, are often placed in the “classic hallucinogen” category—even though most people don’t actually hallucinate when they take them. They may have dream-like visions with their eyes closed, but they rarely open their eyes and see things that are out-and-out not there. MDMA inspires a much softer and more emotional state. It has been called an “empathogen” or “entactogen” because of its ability to allow the user to experience a new sense of empathy and access inner feelings with greater ease. Another drug we’ll explore at the end of this book, ketamine, is in technical terms a dissociative anesthetic, but it has intense psychedelic properties in that it can temporarily dissolve the ego and give users a feeling of oneness with the universe. These drugs affect the brain in neurologically distinct ways, but a growing body of research shows that all of them may be helpful in the treatment of depression. Psychedelic drugs affect different people in different ways, depending in large part on one’s intention and the setting in which they are taken. But they all tend to give us a sense of portentousness, providing the heightened insight and meaningfulness one can also find in dreams or religious excitation.

Changing Our Minds envisions a not-so-distant future where psychedelic drugs can be safely and sanely brought back into our lives. Ben Sessa, the English physician and advocate for the therapeutic use of psychedelics, finds it a “tire-some irritation” that these drugs seem forever linked in the public mind with recreational abuse. “LSD and MDMA began their lives in and belong in medicine,” he writes.⁹ Sessa and others are aware that psychoactive substances are powerful agents. They can be psychologically, spiritually and physically dangerous when used without proper preparation, foresight and guidance. Advocates

⁹ Sessa, p. 5

of their intelligent use do not agree regarding who should be the new gatekeepers guarding the doors of perception, or if there should be *any* gatekeepers.

What's clear, however, is that the criminalization of chemically induced altered states of consciousness has not worked. It has filled our prisons over the past half century with an oppressed class of people entrapped and impoverished by draconian laws against the cultivation and consumption of cannabis, a drug less dangerous to human health than alcohol or tobacco, products freely available at the corner market.

What is it about the nature of marijuana and psychedelics—as opposed to more addictive and deadly drugs like heroin, methamphetamine and cocaine—that the government finds so dangerous? It's increasingly hard to argue that the real reason they are outlawed is because they're without medical value and easy to abuse. What is so threatening to the powers that be about psychedelic plants and drugs are the ideas and insights that they inspire. In the counterculture of the 1960s, they compelled many to question the consumerism and materialism that form the foundation of our capitalist economy.

“We had discovered that love is the fundamental energy of the universe,” LSD researcher Jim Fadiman recalls, “and we wouldn't shut up about it.”¹⁰

In recent years, Fadiman has been collecting accounts of friends and colleagues who have experimented with microdosing, taking sub-perceptual amounts of psychedelic drugs, such as ten micrograms of LSD. This practice, which has become popular among some high-tech workers in San Francisco and Silicon Valley, purportedly spurs creativity without the visual fireworks or loss of ego boundaries that can accompany a high-dose LSD session.

“What it seems to do is make your day more successful and more focused, allowing longer periods of functioning at a good level,” Jim told me. “There are no angels, demons, or out-of-body experiences.”¹¹

Using psychedelics to increase productivity is definitely a sign of the times. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, much larger doses of LSD inspired millions of people coming of age in my generation to work less, not more. One of my favorite consciousness commentators of that era, Alan Watts, noted that high-dose psychedelics create “an attitude that is very bad for business.” Serious side effects, Watts noted, include “improvidence, lack of foresight, diminished sales of insurance policies, and abandoned savings accounts.”¹²

¹⁰ Fadiman, 2011, p. 192

¹¹ Interviews with Jim Fadiman, April 2, 2010 and July 31, 2015

¹² Watts, 1968

One of the mantras of the 1960s was “Question Authority,” and the psychedelic counterculture of that era prompted many of us to question everything, including the very nature of reality. Altered states of consciousness inspired us to reject the dogma and denominationalism of organized religion and value our own spiritual and mystical experience. Psychoactive plants like peyote, psilocybin mushrooms and ayahuasca gave us a new appreciation of our interconnect-edness to the rest of the natural world, inspiring the environmental movement. And, during the war in Vietnam, chemically induced compassion did not help the military-industrial complex persuade us that it was a good idea to send hundreds of thousands of young men to the other side of the world to slaughter people in Southeast Asia.

One of the telling ironies of the second coming of psychedelics is that the reason the U.S. government may soon be forced to reclassify MDMA is that researchers have proven the drug can help psychologically and spiritually heal the next generation of men and women returning from another misguided war. And that is where our story begins.