

SWIMMING  
IN THE  
SACRED

*Wisdom from the  
Psychedelic Underground*

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matter-of-fact manner, “No, no one seemed interested.” Kendra’s story, herstory, if you will, allows a glimpse into the cultural context surrounding the entry of psychedelics into the public sphere. Women had achieved the vote but they still didn’t have a voice, not even within the psychedelic subculture undergoing a cultural and spiritual “awakening.”

### Women of the Psychedelic Underground

As the sixties came to an end, psychedelic drugs were demonized by the press and coopted by rock concerts. It became more and more difficult to find reliable sources of pure medicines. Eventually, the federal government classified all the psychedelics as illegal and dangerous with no medical benefits. Yet some people continued to work in a sacred way with these medicines, quietly and below the radar. The decision to go underground, to continue to access newly illegal drugs, and to guide people, often strangers who were screened and ultimately trusted to be discreet on the basis of their word alone, is quite a leap of faith.

I decided early in the planning of this project to interview only women. I feel that the women doing this work have a different quality to their relationship with the medicines. They seem to have a more subtle, energetic connection with the spirit world that the medicines open up. One example is when I was developing my questionnaire for a research paper entitled “A Study of Ayahuasca Use in North America.”<sup>6</sup> Based on the intuitive wisdom of one of these underground women, I included the question “Do you have an ongoing relationship with the spirit of ayahuasca?” This turned out to be an important aspect of the study. Almost 75 percent of study participants responded yes, and this has continued to influence my understanding of how the relationship with a plant spirit can help heal attachment issues from childhood.

I know a male underground guide who has almost forty years of experience, and he agreed with my decision to focus on women. He said:

I think women make better guides than men. They have menstruated and suffered, and they're better at suffering than men. Their timing is more sensitive. When you're involved with the deepest part of a person's psyche, women are more careful than men, including me. Women tend to trust and respect the person's process and don't push them one way or the other. You can stop someone from crying by simply handing them a box of Kleenex. Women are less likely to get in between the person and their experience.

These women guides don't have a public voice — they are still working underground. Working outside the legal structure requires silence and anonymity, which is why I've used pseudonyms for all the underground guides in this book. However, even when it's freely chosen, remaining invisible is not so easy. Being silent and unseen triggers the cultural experience of being mansplained or just plain ignored, not unlike Kendra Smith who said “no one seemed interested” in her experience. It's as if these women are twice silenced — by both gender issues and drug laws. I identify with having no voice in a myriad of smaller ways, and I very much want them to have their say, even though they must remain anonymous.

Also, there's a historical precedent for women working with medicine plants. It's now accepted that, in ancient Greece, it was women at Eleusis who knew the Secret of Secrets, the recipe for mixing psychoactive plants with beer for the long night of traveling through mystical realms.<sup>7</sup> The same holds true, according to Brian Muraresku, for “all the Indo-European sacraments — the *soma*, *kykeon*, and even Dionysian wine.”<sup>8</sup> Later

on, herbalists, midwives, and witches were predominantly women, and there's even evidence that the first shaman was a woman.<sup>9</sup> All silenced by the patriarchy.

Even now, men dominate the university research teams studying the therapeutic potential of psychedelics, and they are most often the presenters at psychedelic conferences and the authors of psychedelic books.<sup>10</sup> Even when women are acknowledged, their roles are often downplayed. The authors of one research paper admitted that they themselves fell “prey to the same misogynistic assumptions” when they failed to acknowledge that “Gordon Wasson’s wife, Dr. Valentina ‘Tina’ Pavlovna Wasson, had as much if not more influence in bringing the psilocybin mushroom to the attention of North America.”<sup>11</sup> In *Psyche Unbound*, a 2022 book honoring Stan Grof, only three of the twenty contributing authors are women, and of those three, one is a second author and one is long dead.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps this reflects the long-standing gender imbalance in doctorate degrees — only in the last few years have more women earned doctorates than men in subjects related to psychedelic research. Women’s voices are on the rise, but it will take some years before a gender balance is established.

This imbalance persists even when women’s contributions are public. Requa Tolbert and her husband George Greer were the first people to study MDMA and report on their findings in a professional journal.<sup>13</sup> Their description of how to conduct therapeutic sessions with MDMA provided part of the foundation for the MAPS treatment protocol.<sup>14</sup> Although Requa is the second author in these two articles, she had her own voice when she wrote about her experiences at psychedelic conferences, describing “our complaints about ‘the men’s macho attitudes’ about psychedelic use and inquiry: taking heroic doses, mixing agents that do not even grow on the same continent, trivializing ethnobotanical lore, and either ignoring voices of

wise women or ghettoizing them onto a single panel such as “Women and Psychedelics.”

Elsewhere, Requa wrote:

In my life, it has usually been females who have taught me the lessons of attending to emotion and spirit in the course of healing work....My girlfriends coached me in my early efforts to relate to the spirits of the plants and to the elemental forces holding us all up. Of course I know men who think about these things, but it was women, who were not scientists, who were the most energetic in crafting space and ritual to address the spirits of the various Medicines.<sup>15</sup>

These observations were published in 2003, and I daresay not much has changed since then. In addition, the women I interviewed describe a far more intimate relationship to the plants, their allies, and ancestors. They live more closely with these unseen others even when not in ceremony. The relationships transcend their state of consciousness and are part of their everyday lives.

### Women's Experiences

For all these reasons and more, I limited my interviews to women guiding medicine journeys. In addition, I set a criteria of at least twenty years of experience. I knew from my years as a therapist in private practice that this type of work is an art. It's not just about expertise; this work requires wisdom that only comes from decades of experience and personal maturity.

I interviewed a total of fifteen women who fully met this criteria. Two of them had guided Michael Pollan after he had rejected a number of other guides for varying degrees of strangeness, one who was famous within the psychedelic

community. A few interviews lasted one to two hours. Some interviews went on for days, with subsequent conversations many months later. Given the legal risk these women live with, I decided not to ask if I could record the interviews. Instead, I wrote down everything by hand, filling up four traditional school notebooks.

I also conducted auxiliary interviews with women who hadn't worked underground for twenty years. Three women only had ten years of experience. These women tended to be slightly younger than the more-experienced group, but they had the same passion and commitment to the medicines. This younger group gave me a glimpse into how women grow into being elders — they weren't quite there yet with the same confidence and maturity.

Another reason I set a twenty-year criteria is because I didn't want to interview self-appointed guides, those with no lineage in their training who had decided on their own that they were ready to lead journeys. People regularly come up to me at conferences to tell me how they were called by Grandmother Ayahuasca after just a few ceremonies to start leading ceremonies themselves. Ego inflation is alive and well in the psychedelic world.

One woman I met via emails and a few telephone calls is a good example of what I mean by a self-appointed guide. There were so many problems with her story, and they all serve as warnings. First, she described guiding her own mother on an MDMA journey, and she did so with an ulterior motive: She hoped that her mom would come to the realization that her second husband was abusive and that she would end the marriage. On top of this, she overdosed her mother with MDMA. The daughter thought she was giving her mom the same dose that MAPS (the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) uses in their PTSD studies, but she was wrong and



gave way too high a dose. This was her mom's first experience with any kind of entheogen, and she was nauseous and vomiting most of the journey. Surprisingly, the mother was interested in trying it again. The so-called guide was considering a journey where they would both take MDMA in order to become "closer." When I told her she shouldn't be serving as a guide for her own mother, she became defensive and told me that she had consulted with her elders. I rather strongly told her, "Get new elders!"

Training to lead medicine journeys begins with one's own healing. Then it involves entering into a mentorship with an elder, assisting that elder to guide others, receiving feedback and supervision, and finally, years later, working on one's own, hopefully with colleagues available for consultation and support. In fact, two of the women guides told me that when their mentor told them they were ready to guide others or sing in ceremony, they resisted, not feeling quite ready yet. They both reported that it took about a year longer for them to feel ready to lead.

### Connecting to Underground Guides

I wrote *Listening to Ayahuasca* as a result of my personal relationship with the spirit of the plant, which has given me an inkling of how the women psychedelic guides experience their work. Every woman I interviewed talked about her relationship with plant spirits or plant teachers, with the medicines, or with unseen helpers. That said, while I know about this world, and I've experienced it, I don't live there. I still suffer with not quite accepting the unseen world of communicating with plant teachers even as I write about it.

Nevertheless, my ayahuasca book opened up connections for me in the psychedelic community, and in time, those