

Don Hill

Hello, I'm Don Hill. Welcome to *Tapestry*.

MUSIC >> "White Rabbit" >> Jefferson Airplane

Don Hill

It's 1965. A new book, **The Politics of Ecstasy**, is making the rounds on college campuses. Among other things, it says:

"The political and ethical controversies over psychedelic plants are caused by our basic ignorance about what these substances do. They alter consciousness. But how, where, why, and what for?"

MUSIC >> lyric "One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small..."

The writer is Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary. Shortly after the book's publication, Leary urges a generation of children to "turn on, tune in" and "drop out." A year later, 1966, governments 'freak out' and hastily declare war on all hallucinogens, banning them outright.

Leary's evangelism effectively killed formal scientific inquiry into psychedelic drugs. Our understanding of them remains locked in a time-warp. The little new research completed since the 1960s proposes that science should reopen the doors of perception, slammed shut since 1966, and that we have much to learn about entheogens.

Entheogen means 'god-containing' psychoactive plants — herbs, mushrooms and animal-extracts — that stimulate human beings to an altered state of consciousness. These natural hallucinogens have been used by indigenous people as sacraments for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. Entheogens have been used to ease the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood, birthing, and even death.

On today's *Tapestry*, a new look at entheogens. You'll hear how a religious sacrament employing psychedelic plants — declared illegal for most of us — can act as a vaccine against illicit drug-taking, and how for some — the hopelessly addicted — the 'disease' has become part of their cure.

You're not going to like what I have to say. It's deeply disturbing. It's a story about addiction and a remedy that will sound outrageous. I'm going to tell you about a sacred ritual which prescribes psychedelic drugs to dull the harmful effects of addiction.

The story is all over the map: the jungle of the Amazon, the high desert of the American Southwest, and it begins here in Canada's North.

SOUND >> Innu women chatter in studio

Don Hill

In December of 2000, a group of Innu women from the troubled communities of Davis Inlet and Sheshatsui, in eastern Labrador, came to Toronto and the CBC with a book. It was a collection of stories, an oral history the women had gathered among themselves, a recollection of life on the land as it was a generation ago. The Innu had once been a nomadic people, self-sustaining, independent of the welfare and alcohol and substance abuse that now devastates them.

Nympha Byrne

My story in there is about my parents. Because where I was coming from, my parents were drinkers. I never really understood where my mom was coming from. Now I know where she was coming from, because she told her story in there...

Don Hill

This is Nympha Byrne. She's one of the three Innu women who joined me in studio.

Nympha Byrne

...I always wondered what was wrong with her. But now I understand. She was abused, and she was not really looked after, and that's where my mom was coming from. And for me, it was hard for me, too...

Don Hill

Nympha Byrne's story is sadly typical of what's become of the Innu people. It's a story you've probably heard and seen in the national press. The television cameras have recorded the misery and moved on now. But Mick Lowe is among the handful of journalists who stayed behind to learn more. One Innu elder told him about a generation of neglect —

about what happened to the Innu after they stopped following the caribou.

Mick Lowe

He referred to what was happening to his people as “ethnocide.” And I thought it was very interesting. He referred not to ‘genocide,’ which has become, in some ways, unfortunately, almost a cliché, but, rather, to “ethnocide,” and it means simply the death of a culture. I think that’s a very apt description for what’s happening to the Innu. They have lost their way.

SOUND >> Innu woman speaking in her language

Don Hill

It’s late in my interview with the Innu women. “Is your book the recollection of a culture now gone,” I began gently, “or is it the foundation to build again, to renew the Innu way of life?” I had hoped the latter half of this question might prompt some positive discussion. Dead silence. The youngest of the three women, Nympha Byrne, choked back tears and finally responded. “I wanted to know why my mother wouldn’t hug me. Now I know,” she said.

The Innu had lost sight of themselves. A livelihood and culture, once sustained completely by the spirit of the land, had been replaced by substance abuse and a world-view proposed by satellite television that “has lots to sell,” one critic observed, “but no stories to tell.”

SOUND >> Innu woman speaking in her language

Nympha Byrne (translating)

She said, “When a child is very young, they watch television. And as they get older, they get very confused, and they get mixed up in thinking. They don’t see themselves as Innu people. Because watching so many things, watching things on television, they forget who they are, where they are coming from.”

Don Hill

Innu children at Davis Inlet are dying at an unprecedented rate: five times the national average. They continue to kill themselves, regardless of extraordinary intervention by social agencies at

every government level. Nothing works. There’s a sense of hopelessness in the community.

“We need to get back on the land,” one Innu woman quietly told me. Another picked up the thread, “We got to remember: Tell these stories again.” The third nodded sadly. “The elders, most of them are gone now,” she said. And by implication, the memory of the culture had vanished. All the women had left to them was a slim little book of recollections — the book I had in hand.

That was last winter. The conversation still haunts me.

I didn’t know what to do with my interview with the Innu women. I didn’t know if recounting the ongoing misery at Davis Inlet — other than voyeurism — could somehow be useful. I’ve never lived the nightmare the Innu women speak of, but I’ve had my own troubles with alcohol, been witness to dark places and, mercifully, an epiphany, after a close brush with disaster.

And then I got an idea: What if the disease is part of the cure?

Science has long known that there’s an innate drive in all human beings to seek altered states of consciousness. Think about the coffee you drink, the caffeine in chocolate, soft drinks, even breakfast cereal, and that heavy-duty exercise routine, the one that puts you into the ‘zone.’ What’s too much and what’s too little? The wisdom to know the difference sometimes escapes us.

I had read about the success of the Native American Church in breaking the spell of alcoholism by administering peyote in a ritual sacrament. Church members have the legal right to use and cultivate the mystical cactus. So I travelled into the New Mexico desert last summer to interview a Navajo medicine man.

It was 100 degrees when I started the day. Now I’m driving through a storm — windshield wipers barely keeping time with the deluge of rain. So much for the desert motif.

Intending to wait out the cloudburst, I started to inch over the shoulder, but all the wet had turned the

sandy soil along the side of the highway into a sticky gumbo. I kept driving. Gambled I wouldn't get stuck in the mud when I turned off the main road, itself a modest two-laner. Spun the tires a bit, swivelling inside the rut made by a predecessor. Yappy dogs and a zillion cats guarded the muted turquoise house — my destination.

Eugene Beyale — Spirit Eagle — seems surprised I'm on his doorstep. "The storm was pretty bad," he says. Yet auspicious, since it ended just minutes before I arrived. And I said as much. The middle-aged Navajo medicine man nodded, then opened the door to his home.

I present a gift, a watermelon, to his wife. She smiles in approval. I smile back. Silence. "Why have you come here?" Spirit Eagle asks warily.

A one-time member of AIM, the American Indian Movement, he has good reason to be suspicious of white people arriving out of the blue. Spirit Eagle was at Wounded Knee. He had been witness to the violent confrontation with federal government forces in the 1970s. He later went around the world — sang about the 'incident' — a young man with a guitar and a band called Mr. Indian & Time. And now he was watching me.

I told him about the Innu, that I was a traveller not a tourist, that I had come a long way to hear what he had to say. And I promised to listen without interruption.

Spirit Eagle

I remember when I was growing up, back in the '50s and '60s. When I saw a cowboy-and-Indian movie, it seemed like I wanted to be Gary Cooper, I wanted to be John Wayne, I wanted to be Roy Rogers, I wanted to be Gene Autry. I didn't want to be those people that got beaten. It was amazing.

And as I grew older, I thought these people really discredit my people. A lot of our people went through a lot of suffering. Treaties were broken. There was land that was taken from our grandfathers. They paid the price. It was almost like an American holocaust took place here. Kill the Indian, but save the individual. I don't know what kind of sick thought that was. But that type of weaponry was put against our people. And I think that's where a lot of confusion

came. A lot of people lost their roots. A lot of people lost their inner strength, who they are. A lot of people lost their self-identity. A lot of people lost their vision. A lot of people lost their tradition. A lot of families split up.

It's still happening today. And our young people are listening to this. They're tape recorders. The human psyche is running all the time. And I think the way we are is the way young people are perceiving, and it's the way they're acting out, because of our own ignorance. That's what I think. So the search back to find who we are, I think, is the goal that we have to set ourselves.

Don Hill

The way back for Spirit Eagle and members of the Native American Church is the ancient peyote religion.

Spirit Eagle

I was raised around the Native American Church. I would always be travelling with my parents, going to ceremony to ceremony to ceremony, for years and years. One day, I asked my father, "This peyote 'medicine,' what is it, dad? What is this 'medicine'?" He said, "God made this 'medicine' for the people of the earth. Let me tell you a story about how the 'medicine' came to the people..."

Don Hill

An old, sick woman, not wishing to be a burden to her people, walked off into the desert to die. She soon grew weary and lay down near a bush, waiting for nature to take its course. The sun was high. It was unbearably hot. She closed her eyes.

Spirit Eagle

All of a sudden, she heard this voice, and this voice said, "Partake of me. I will make you well." She looked around. "Who could this be that's talking?" And she heard the voice again: "Partake of me. I will make you well." And that voice was coming from that plant! A green plant over there.

Don Hill

It was a peyote cactus. She ate some of it. Her energy returned. So much so, she found her way back to her people, encountering the 'spirits' of the 'medicine' along the way. The grandmothers and grandfathers of the sun taught her the sacred rituals:

the all-night vigil with the drum, the songs, and the 'medicine.'

Spirit Eagle

And so that's how the 'medicine' came to the people, and this is how we use it today. When you go to ceremony, you can feel the energy of 'medicine.' Humility takes over. You may have worries. You may have anxiety. You may have rage. You may have been abused. You may have been torn up inside mentally, emotionally. But this 'medicine' is the comforter. This 'medicine' is the healing power of the Great Spirit.

Don Hill

The ritual use of the psychedelic cactus in the Southwestern United States blended with aspects of Christian belief in the late 19th century. It soon spread to other Indian tribes. And today, the 250,000 members of the Native American Church have the legal right to use the peyote 'medicine.' And for the alcoholics and drug addicts who have run afoul of the law, the Native American Church is an opportunity for redemption. Spirit Eagle...

Spirit Eagle

Here in Navajo land, we have a choice. If you're caught drinking and they want to send you to 'detox', you can choose treatment through this peyote 'medicine.' It's allowed now. For many, many, many years it wasn't allowed. I think people here are finally convinced that this 'medicine' does work on the human psyche.

George Greer

I'm George Greer. I'm a psychiatrist in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and I am the medical director of the Heffter Research Institute, coordinating psychedelic drug research here in the United States, Europe and some in South America.

One of my metaphors is, they use dynamite to blow out oil well fires. You need a more powerful thing to blow out the flame of addiction. And psychedelic 'medicines's are not addictive. They help a person reach the more spiritual core of themselves. And Stan Grof believes that, for the addicts he worked with, their real hunger ultimately was a spiritual hunger for contact with their unlimited divine nature. They never got that with alcohol or cocaine or heroin. It's a facsimile of it. With the psychedelic drug, they

can get much closer and have that spiritual experience. It opens the door.

Dr. Charles Grob

You raise the example of the Native American Church. I think it's important we look at the outcome. What are the effects of participation in a peyote religious ritual to these individuals, many of whom are profoundly ill, many of them inflicted with serious, often terminal occurring, alcoholism?

Don Hill

This is Dr. Charles Grob, a professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine. He's one of a handful of researchers in America who have had permission to investigate the psychiatric value of hallucinogens.

Dr. Charles Grob

Let me read to you a quote from Carl Menninger, one of the great, most revered figures in the development of American psychiatry in the 20th century. Menninger stated, "Peyote is not harmful to these people. It is beneficial, comforting, inspiring, and appears to be spiritually nourishing. It is a better antidote to alcohol than anything the missionaries, the white man, the American Medical Association and the public health services have come up with." So, I think even a very, very senior figure as Menninger had this profound insight that participation in peyote ritual was extremely therapeutic to these very sad, beaten-down people, for whom alcoholism was just ravaging their culture.

Don Hill

For some members of the Native American Church — people with chronic addiction — the 'disease' has been part of their cure. That's how things are sometimes, the opposite of what you might have expected.

The second time I met with Spirit Eagle, I remembered not to shake his hand unless it was offered, "and, if he does, just a light touch of the fingertips will do," John Halpern advised. He should know. A Harvard psychiatrist, Dr. Halpern spent over two years gaining the trust of the Navajo elders. He wanted approval to study their ways with the peyote 'medicine.' John told me how the process started in a dusty community hall, where his credentials, his wealth, didn't count for much.

“I was under *their* microscope,” Dr. Halpern recalled of the night. “Everyone was talking in Navajo. And here I am sitting up on stage on a stacking chair. One elder, a really old guy, spoke to the room for a long while. I didn’t know what was being said, but I sure got the picture when the old man’s voice took on an edge. Then he turned, pointed his finger at me and said, ‘1492!’ I thought, that’s it, I’ll never get the approval.”

I didn’t think I would get approved of either. And I was lucky that John smoothed the path to Spirit Eagle. The Navajo ‘road man’ told me more about the ‘medicine.’ And I told him more about the Innu, how they had lost sight of themselves. I wanted to know where the story had gone. Perhaps he could tell me.

Spirit Eagle

This is what the ‘medicine’ is all about: to lead you back to that truth, to that powerful truth. You sit in circle. You meditate. You think about your life. You’re helping the next-door person that needs help. Maybe just by you expressing yourself in circle, that person that needs help will find the spiritual nourishment that they need, the spiritual power that they need, the spiritual oars that they need, the spiritual story that maybe you have. By sharing that in circle, that person will find relief, will find wholeness within themselves to move again, to live again, and to sing the joyful songs of life again. This is what we do in ceremony.

It’s not a taboo. It’s not superstition. That was written in books. I’ve been there! My father was a medicine man. I sat right there beside him, and I heard him tell just wonderful, heartfelt stories about his vision. It was so powerful. It just overtook me by hearing my father tell his stories about the old days, about how he was young, how he used to race in the morning toward the sun, how he used to use corn pollen, how he made offerings to the Morning Spirit, to the morning stars, to the morning sun, to the Mother Earth. This is what ceremony is about: to develop your spiritual, moral character. This is what it really is.

A long time ago, a boy went on vision quest at 14 years old. When he came back from the vision quest, his whole mentality, his whole attitude, his whole individuality, his whole personality was now different.

He was empowered by the ocean forces of the sun, the medicine world of the earth. He came back as a man. He knew his responsibility to himself and to his people and to his family and to his life. Now we don’t do that anymore. But it’s here. It’s now. So take it. Reclaim it. Embrace it. You are the power, itself, made manifest as you. Everything is there you need. *Huh-ho.*

SOUND >> *ayahuascao*, shaman

Don Hill

South America. The Amazon. This is the song of an *ayahuascao*, a shaman. He’s under the influence of *ayahuasca*, a potent brew of two seemingly unrelated jungle plants — the sacred vines of the soul.

Ayahuasca is an extremely powerful hallucinogen. Shamans believe the mystical concoction is a window into one’s own future and the past. *Ayahuasca* is also non-addictive, and it’s almost always administered in a ritual setting. Dr. Charles Grob...

Dr. Charles Grob

In 1993, I travelled to the Brazilian Amazon with a group of other researchers from the United States and Europe. We met with Brazilian medical and psychiatric collaborators there, and we set out to conduct a Phase One, extensive investigation of the affects of *ayahuasca* on subjects who had been members of an *ayahuasca* church for at least the past ten years. You should keep in mind that *ayahuasca* in Brazil has been legal in the practice of religion since the mid-’80s.

Many of the subjects we worked with had, prior to their entry into the *ayahuasca* church — and the *ayahuasca* church we worked with was the Uniao do Vegital or the UDV — many of these individuals, prior to their entry, had led very dysfunctional lives. I interviewed quite a number of these individuals who had had serious problems with alcohol, drugs of abuse. They had had serious disorders of mood regulation, a lot of trouble with the law, had been in prison.

Following their entry into the *ayahuasca* church, where, twice monthly, they participated in religious ceremonies where *ayahuasca* was used as a

psychoactive sacrament, what was so astonishing was that these individuals — many of them hardcore alcoholics — were entirely able to abandon their use of alcohol and other illicit or even legal drugs. Also, they entirely ceased their use of tobacco products. And they talked at great length and with great passion about the degree to which their lives were transformed by their encounters with *ayahuasca* when utilized within the strict context of the Uniao do Vegital *ayahuasca* religion in Brazil.

SOUND >> international phone ring

Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito

Hello?

Don Hill

Doctor?

Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito

Don. This interview...

Don Hill

I'm on the line with Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito. He's in Sao Paulo, Brazil. I ask him about the 'tea,' a sacramental brew of *ayahuasca*.

Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito

I first met the 'tea' 19 years ago, when I was travelling to the Amazon. I was invited to participate in a ritual of the Uniao do Vegital. It was a wonderful experience and an experience I could see all my life like in a video in a very...

Don Hill

Dr. Brito soon joined the UDV church. Today, he's a special consultant to the World Health Organization and a director of public health for 33-million people in the State of Sao Paolo.

As a right of passage, children — some as young as 14 — drink *ayahuasca* tea with UDV church members close at hand to guide the youngsters' visionary experiences. The church claims the 'tea' acts as a deterrent against illicit drug-taking.

Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito

They have the opportunity to receive a vaccine against drug abuse. And also, we have hundreds, hundreds of examples.

Dr. Charles Grob

I think they have a different slant on "Just say 'no.'" I think theirs would be "Just say k-n-o-w." The adult members of the Uniao do Vegital, the *ayahuasca* church I work with in Brazil, believe that, for their teenage children, the opportunity to participate in a profoundly religious experience — tightly structured, within ritual context, accompanied by their parents — is an invaluable experience that will protect their teenage children from engaging in anti-social activities, protect them from developing problems with alcohol and drugs of abuse, and solidify a very positive set of ethical and moral values.

Dr. Glaucus de Souza Brito

The drug addicts that are coming to drink this 'tea,' they decide to give up drug addiction — cocaine, marijuana, crack, and alcohol addiction — under the ritual and religious context.

Dr. Charles Grob

The ritual context is critical. These are not substances which should be used in a recreational or frivolous manner. And I also believe that if we are going to fully explore their therapeutic potential, we need to appreciate the value of ritual and appreciate really the necessity to acknowledge and, in a sense, embrace that there is a spiritual dimension that these substances do place individuals in touch with.

Don Hill

Ayahuasca is a potent hallucinogen and an equally potent purgative — a fancy way of saying, you throw up a lot, and I mean a lot. That's why it's also known as the 'vomit plant.' And because of its reputation, it's an unlikely candidate as the dope of choice for recreational use.

The active ingredient in *ayahuasca* is DMT, *dimethyl tryptamine*, a substance that occurs naturally in the human body. It's found in the major organs, including the brain. There's a joke that everyone might have to be arrested because DMT is a controlled substance. It's against the law in Canada and just about everywhere else, except Brazil. In America, DMT is also a "Schedule 1" drug, which, by definition, has "no apparent medical value."

In the 1990s, Dr. Rick Strassman, a psychiatrist at the University of New Mexico, was given a reluctant go-ahead by federal authorities to investigate the

therapeutic potential of DMT. He recruited 60 volunteers — middle-aged professionals, business entrepreneurs, community leaders — people who also had a familiarity with psychedelic drugs, and he gave them intravenous injections of DMT. He wrote a book about his clinical research: **DMT: The Spirit Molecule**.

Dr. Rick Strassman

As an undergraduate, I was quite interested in altered states of consciousness and read and learned as much as I could about the phenomenon. At a certain point, it seemed to me there must be some biological basis or underpinnings for mystical experiences. And at that time, I was led to the pineal gland, which had always been looked at with some reverence by mystical traditions both from the East and the West. I started speculating about whether or not there was something made in the pineal that, when activated or released in high levels, might underlie or somehow mediate mystical experiences, things that looked, to all intents and purposes, like a major psychedelic experience but had nothing to do with taking a psychedelic drug. So by the time we began the research, some of my thinking about that was if giving DMT, a naturally occurring psychedelic, if that mimicked the phenomenology or the syndrome that people described of mystical states, near-death states, states resulting from deep meditation, visualizations, those sorts of thing, then that would strengthen my hypothesis that those states that occur naturally without drugs were mediated by this particular compound, DMT, that I was giving to people in the research.

Don Hill

What did you learn?

Dr. Rick Strassman

Big doses of DMT were absolutely psychedelic. They mimicked in many ways, some of the experiences, some of the states of consciousness that I had been proposing were mediated by levels of naturally produced DMT: mystical states, near-death states. The experiences or the reports from our volunteers that caught me most off guard or most by surprise and actually caught them most by surprise were the very high frequency or prevalence of reports by the volunteers of contact with 'beings,' these non-material, incorporeal beings, that, in many ways, replicated some of the alien abduction literature but,

in a lot of other ways, replicated and was consistent with a lot of the shamanic reports of beings and entities, helpers. Some of the near-death experience type of volunteers' reports also included a sensation or a perception of these beings as angels or demons. I was amazed and surprised by the frequency of these reports. I'd almost forgotten entirely about how often the volunteers' first statement, upon opening their eyes was, "There were lots of them. They were expecting me. They were happy to see me. They did things to me." There was this 'they, they, they' about it. And after a while, it shook up my model of what I was doing and how to interpret it, and it certainly wasn't among the expectations of nearly all of the volunteers as well.

Dr. Charles Grob

The Strassman reports are very intriguing. But I think the indigenous people who have had centuries and centuries — perhaps millenniums — of experience with these very powerful, very mysterious substances, regardless of where in the world you get these reports, they talk about "plant spirits." They talk about working with the spirits of the forest, the spirits of the plants. Of course, these reports are in great conflict with our conventional modern-day mindset. Nevertheless, I think at times we need to just allow our imagination more breadth and take a closer examination of this phenomenon. Even if it confounds how we perceive reality, I think, out of respect for the native peoples, who are the true experts in the realm of these plant technologies, there may be something to learn. With our conditioning from our culture, perhaps we are at a very early rudimentary stage of our learning.

Don Hill

For some people, the 'disease' has also been a remedy to chronic addiction. They literally get 'stoned straight.' And under the influence of DMT, many also report encounters with supernatural beings, visions of entities and unusual creatures.

So, might the 'disease' also call up the stories the Innu people of eastern Labrador have lost sight of? It's a question I put to Jeremy Narby, an anthropologist, who, for the last 17 years, has worked closely with the indigenous people of the western Amazon in South America.

Dr. Narby is a Canadian. He grew up in the suburbs of Montreal, later moving with his family to a small town in Switzerland. His doctorate is from Stanford University. He's no flake. Nevertheless, his book **The Cosmic Serpent** makes a bold claim: The shamanistic way of knowing is identical to the scientific way of knowing.

Jeremy Narby realized the entwined serpents he visualized while under the influence of *ayahuasca* bore a striking resemblance to DNA, the double helix. What's more, this astonishing claim stood up when three molecular biologists confirmed Dr. Narby's hypothesis after their own experience with *ayahuasca*. And that was just the beginning. Jeremy Narby...

Jeremy Narby

In doing that research, walking around the forest with Ashaninca Indians and asking them what they knew about plants, not only could I see they knew all kinds of things about all kinds of plants — this is the most biologically diverse place on earth — but they also said, when asked about the origin of their knowledge, that it was the plants themselves that had told them and that their *ayahuasqueros* or *tabaceros* take *ayahuasca*, which is a hallucinogenic plant brew, or eat tobacco concentrate and speak in their visions with the essences which are common to all life forms and gain information. Well, I heard this story several times from several different people as I was leading my investigation. Finally, one of these Ashaninca men said to me, "Brother Jeremy, if you want to know the answer to your question, you have to try *ayahuasca*. And if you like I can show you sometime." He said it was the television of the forest and that it allowed one to see images and learn things.

I didn't really know what he was talking about. I knew that *ayahuasca* was a powerful hallucinogen. I'd actually tried LSD several times before this, so I thought that I knew what he was talking about. More fool me, because several weeks later, this fellow showed up with this bitter brew. On the platform of a quiet house, he administered it, and then started singing these very high-pitched tunes that were loops of slightly dissonant melodies.

SOUND >> *ayahuascarero*, shaman

Jeremy Narby

And suddenly, I found myself in a world beyond my wildest dreams: this hair-raising world of enormous fluorescent snakes that looked much more real than ordinary reality. And it started to explain things to me in a kind of thought language that were painfully true about myself. They said, "You're just a human being, a tiny human being." And I could see, simply looking at them, that what they were saying was true, because my version of what reality was — the three-dimensional, material version of reality that I felt so sure I understood, carbon atoms, hydrogen atoms et cetera, what I had been taught in school — had bottomless arrogance. Because I presupposed that what my eyes were showing me didn't exist. And so the first 15 minutes into this experience caused my world-view to collapse in front of me.

Then I had to get up and I started vomiting colours and seeing in the dark and having visions of levitating Ashaninca women about a yard off the ground. Completely hair-raising visions. What do you think when suddenly you can see in the dark? This is not thinkable almost. So in this state of mind where everything is suddenly upside down, I returned to the circle where the fellow was still singing or, rather, stumbled back to the circle and sat down. Following his melodies, I found myself leaving my body. I found myself miles above the planet. The planet looked like a small ball of ice. Materialist anthropologist has out-of-body experience.

He shifted his melody. And suddenly, I found myself landing right back in my body and became inundated with hundreds of thousands of images, like the veins of a human hand and the veins of a green leaf flashing back and forth. The message was 'same stuff.' A plant and a human being is made of the same stuff. You're the same family. I was an anthropocentric anthropologist. A human being who studies human beings. Suddenly, it became clear to me that I was part of this biosphere of life that surrounds the whole planet.

SOUND >> *ayahuascarero*, shaman

Jeremy Narby

They say that plants have spirits and animals have spirits. They don't speak Spanish, Ashaninca or English, these plants, but they can communicate with a human being via spirits picked up in the modified

consciousness of a shaman. And so what shamanism is all about is communicating with these plant spirits. They call them “plant teachers.”

Don Hill

Jeremy Narby thinks there’s a relationship between DMT — the psychoactive ingredient of *ayahuasca* — and DNA. In his book **The Cosmic Serpent**, he says human experience can modify the genetic code over time. He goes on to suggest that, because of that, it should be possible to access first-hand experience and historical information encoded in human DNA. In turn, this suggests the story of our ancestry never disappears.

Jeremy Narby

I found myself, the next day, trying to make sense of this mind-boggling experience. On one level, it confirmed what my Ashaninca consultants had said: “You can drink *ayahuasca* and learn things.” I’d learned that I was puny and that I was somehow part of nature. I’d also learned that the Ashaninca’s seemingly fanciful notions corresponded to something powerful that flew in the face of my own version of reality.

Don Hill

I’m startled by Jeremy Narby’s explanation. A lot of his story mirrors what Spirit Eagle told me about the peyote ‘medicine,’ how it’s used in the Native American Church: the idea that spirits are real, that they communicate, transmit useful information about the natural world. And in a conversation with Rick Strassman, I wondered out loud that if the ‘disease’ is part of the cure, then somehow maybe part of the Innu’s story, which is deeply rooted in the land — no, it’s a crazy idea, and I stopped myself. Dr. Strassman completed my thought.

Rick Strassman

Is there any validity or any appeal to giving mind-altering drugs to people with drug-abuse problems, particularly as you were discussing, those who have been totally disenfranchised from their cultural heritage? In other words, they’ve forgotten who they are and where they come from, what their stories are, what their dreams used to be.

Another person who’s work has influenced my thinking is that of Rupert Sheldrake in England and his hypothesis of ‘morphic resonance,’ in which case

if enough people have a certain experience, a certain memory, that it is that much easier for people to tap into those memories in certain situations. That’s part of the model behind why you give people who never have been to the Amazon DMT. They’ve never seen a jaguar or a snake, and they have visions of jaguars and snakes. That’s because so many people in the past have taken DMT and seen jaguars and snakes. If DMT provides access to realms though in almost a generic way that they’ve lost touch with, then I could see that, being in a receptive, open state, in the way that DMT does — it basically obliterates personality and cultural conditioning — one becomes a lot more receptive, a container, as it were, a receptacle for non-material information.

Don Hill

It’s one thing to mitigate the ravages of addiction, to cure alcoholism, the substance abuse. But it still doesn’t patch up the rift in a culture — the Innu way of life — that’s had its heart ripped out. It doesn’t repair the stories, the stories the people once lived inside, now displaced by time and memory.

As the host of *Tapestry*, I’ve been made aware that spirit always speaks to those who can ‘hear’ and reveals itself to those who can ‘see’.

Perhaps the ‘story’ never disappears. What if, like a river driven underground, it eventually resurfaces, popping up though in unexpected places? I’ve interviewed Tibetan Buddhist lamas and other First Nations elders who vouch for these imaginal worlds, genuine places that exist, are navigable, and have an inherent logic of their own. To get there, you must enter into an altered ‘state of grace’, a province of mind which has no location in the material world.

Two books — Rick Strassman’s **DMT: The Spirit Molecule** and Jeremy Narby’s **The Cosmic Serpent** — sparked my notion that perhaps the Innu’s story — thought to be forever silenced with the death of community elders — can somehow make itself apparent once more by way of a ritual hallucinogen. However, entheogenic plants — okay, let’s call them what they are: psychedelic plants — don’t naturally grow in the Arctic. It’s possibly the only place on the planet where indigenous people haven’t cultivated or had access to ritual plants over millennia.

Yes, it's true that there are other ways of knowing in the North. The Innu's neighbours, the Inuit, for instance, have the time-honoured practice of going out in nature and suffering through cold and deprivation, for one. But it's a dangerous path, potentially fatal, now that the elder guides are mostly gone, their rituals for survival forgotten.

Jeremy Narby

There actually is a locally available, but extremely difficult, path. And the advantage of *ayahuasca*, compared to the Inuit technique traditionally, is that it's a shortcut.

Don Hill

Instead of sending Innu children to detox clinics in St. John's, what if the authorities considered sending them south to shamans in the jungle of Peru or the Native American Church in New Mexico or having the 'medicine,' sacramental plants, and the indigenous people who know the rituals brought to the North, the one place where the 'medicine' has yet to travel?

Some final thoughts from Spirit Eagle.

Spirit Eagle

There is something inside of you, and it's time that we lived those dreams. Take that dream into your heart. and walk that dream on Mother Earth. Because you can crush truth to earth, but truth will rise again. Truth lives forever in you. And you have it within you. *Huh-ho*.

Don Hill

It may never be possible for the Innu of eastern Labrador to fully reconnect with the land and the nomadic way of life. But the spirit of the land — I hope — is still there for those people and especially their young. Nympha Byrne...

Nympha Byrne (translating)

"In Davis, they still believe in those things."

Don Hill

The younger generation?

Nympha Byrne (translating)

"The younger generation." Now she said, "The younger generation are coming, trying to get that back again."

Don Hill

Is it possible to reconstruct through these stories that you tell? Are they still there to be told?

Nympha Byrne (translating)

"Yeah, they're still there."

Don Hill

And that's *Tapestry* for this week. Comments about today's program are welcome...

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