

My altered states: A doctor's extraordinary account of trauma, psychedelics, and spiritual growth

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The opening pages of this book contain a Yiddish proverb that provides a clue as to why the author decided to write about the intimate experiences that are presented therein: "Troubles overcome are worth telling." In his candid account, Strassman informs the reader that "I have been recording my altered state experiences since my late teen years, as well as remembering and reconstructing ones that occurred earlier" (p. xi). He also observes that: "Ultimately, however, there is no final redemption, no tidy ending" (p. xi). At the same time, there is some trepidation in Strassman's disclosure of his psychedelic memoir: "These are deeply personal accounts, and I admit to some anxiety [in] sharing them" (p. xiv).

Rick Strassman (b. 1952) is a clinical associate professor of psychiatry in the School of Medicine at the University of New Mexico. He brings to this study an impressive range of clinical insights, which have been grounded in hundreds of psychedelic sessions that he supervised while researching DMT and psilocybin in the 1990s. Additionally, he underwent four years of psychoanalysis in sessions that took place up to five days a week, and was a practitioner of Zen Buddhism for over two decades before ultimately returning to his native Jewish tradition.

This impressive background informs the author's rich perspective on entheogenic experiences, which uniquely qualifies him to write a work such as this—one that will interest mental health professionals, spiritual seekers, and the public alike. Strassman writes, "I bring to bear a variety of explanatory models with which to interpret my own altered states" (p. xii) and adds, "These include concepts like set, setting, intention, and dose; the nature of the unconscious; brain networks and psychopharmacology; and metaphysical considerations of the relationship between the worlds of spirit and matter" (pp. xii–xiii).

Strassman's preface ("Research is Me-Search") is followed by an opening piece titled "Exploring Altered States of Consciousness." The work contains twenty-eight chapters, in two parts, which depict the author's experiences in this field from birth to early adulthood. At the conclusion of each chapter, he applies four interpretive models to help elucidate his interpretation—psychopharmacology, psychoanalysis, Buddhist thought, and Jewish metaphysics. The publication has been handsomely augmented by images from renowned artist Merrilee Challiss.

Throughout the text, he provides perceptive pointers on making sense of the psychedelic experience, and shows how uniquely personal it can be. For example:

[A]ltered states are intensely private, existing in our own minds. While we can describe and discuss them, it is not (yet) possible for anyone else to share the exact same subjective experience. And even if that were possible, our reaction to and interpretation of that experience would be uniquely ours. This is why reading accounts of others' altered states is so compelling. We look for similarities and differences between ours and the writer's. (p. xv)

Strassman defines two key concepts within entheogenic use: *set* as "our mental, physical, and spiritual condition when we enter an altered state" (p. xvi) and *setting* as "everything else, the 'not-you' part of the experience, the outside world" (p. xvii). He stresses the "importance of a supportive environment; that is, a proper setting ... warm, supportive, empathic, and encouraging" (pp. 126, 127). Strassman explains:

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Psychedelics work on our individual mind, our personal psychology, our unique psyche. We call them “psychedelic” for that reason. They are “mind-manifesting” or “mind-disclosing,” nonspecific amplifiers of more or less conscious material already residing in our mind. (p. 126)

In general terms, they activate and enhance what is already within the psychic substance. Strassman writes, “[P]sychedelics amplify and lend more credence to preexisting mental contents” (p. 146) or “Psychologically, psychedelics amplify more or less conscious preexisting mental contents: feelings and thoughts, especially their meaningfulness, impact, and truth value” (p. 250).

Strassman mentions the transpersonal Intellect (or the “eye of the heart,” a faculty of direct perception unmediated by the senses), and his ideas about how psychedelics may be able to unlock this vision. Yet this would require a grasp of metaphysics, in order to understand the deeper workings of the psyche, which is uniquely situated between the corporeal and the Spirit. By recalling these innate principles (through ‘recollection’ or *anamnesis*)—in the depths of our human substance—a true restoration of our spiritual discernment can take place. Yet the use of entheogens, even with optimal “set” and “setting,” cannot access vertical dimensions of reality when unmoored from the protective framework of a sacred tradition.

Strassman points out that “psychedelic memories do not always correspond to real events” (p. 10). To aid in a better comprehension and safe navigation of these realms of consciousness, he notes the importance of having a psychedelic ‘sitter.’ He writes, “A good sitter assists in maximizing benefit and minimizing harm” (p. 10). While a sitter is indeed beneficial as the author suggests, what is even more crucial is an operative metaphysical framework, along with a qualified guide who participates in this reality and can serve as a support to ensure the most favorable conditions and outcomes.

Strassman makes an important observation about the instability of the intermediary realm, which he describes as “a madhouse of the psyche. It’s a mental space whose essence is madness” (p. 26). For this reason, modern psychology is in a serious dilemma because, for the most part, it does not recognize the reality of the human soul, let alone its reliance on the Spirit. As the mind and the empirical ego cannot understand themselves, at their own level, they stand in need of a transpersonal frame of reference that illuminates them. Strassman identifies the interdependence of the spiritual dimension in mental health:

[S]piritual and psychological development differ yet impact one another. Psychological burdens make it difficult to attain enlightenment. And if a *kensho*—like any other powerful altered state—occurs in an unbalanced mind, that power may magnify one’s psychopathology rather than heal it. (p. 31)

The spiritual void in the modern world becomes altogether apparent when we are able to assess the human condition from an existential perspective. Strassman observed that he “was becoming suddenly aware of the prospect that

[his] life lacked a center of gravity” (p. 71). It is the spiritual path that affords an awareness of our need for transcendence and access to our sacred center.

Strassman writes: “From the psychospiritual perspective, suffering—whether due to our own or others’ actions—may serve a valuable function” (p. 205). From this vantage point, we can better understand what he means by the following: “With psychedelics ... I did not get the trip I wanted, but the trip I needed” (p. 30).

Ideally, it would be the Spirit that discloses the inner maladies of our heart that keep us tethered to the lower dimension of the soul, in order for us to move closer to the Divine Reality that is the basis of our true identity. With the use of entheogens, vulnerability is enhanced, which can affect our cognition and perception. Strassman writes: “Psychedelics increase suggestibility ... under their influence we are more likely to do, think, feel, or perceive something after receiving a suggestion” (p. 168). This can contribute to “extreme dark states: sad, weak, scared, helpless, and confused” (p. 134); in contrast, they can also amplify “positive emotions—happiness, relaxation, and expansiveness” (p. 169).

Toward the end of the text, Strassman discloses his own frightening experience with extreme conditions such as psychosis. He writes of one such episode as follows: “It was a manifestation of a psychological disorder, a state clearly outside the realm of ‘normal everyday’ mental functioning” (p. 228). These terrifying situations compelled him to question his sanity, and to recognize the inherent confusion entailed by non-ordinary states of consciousness. He attributes this unsettling destabilization to not being rooted in one of humanity’s divinely revealed spiritual traditions: “Without grounding in any one system, my search becomes increasingly confused” (p. 274).

During the period in which he experienced psychosis, Strassman prepared a manifesto that communicated his messianic aspirations: “I want to develop a new model of healing that combines psychedelic drugs, Buddhism, and psychoanalysis. It will treat the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. It will revolutionize medicine and the future of humanity” (p. 242). Strassman was trying to construct a psychedelic religion of sorts combining “Acid and the Maharishi” (p. 242), the latter being Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1917–2008), founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. This serves to demonstrate that, without the safeguards afforded by the teachings and practices of sacred tradition, even mental health professionals can go astray under the influence of mind-expanding substances.

The psychedelic renaissance, with its antinomian orientation, may very well benefit from the universal and timeless wisdom at the heart of all authentic spiritual traditions, which can teach us how entheogens may be used safely for enduring healing and wholeness. This experimental movement has become a marketplace for mass consumption, offering a plethora of books, self-professed masters, and luxurious retreats. Yet how is one to make sense of this proliferation of entheogenic ‘therapy,’ in order not to be seduced by rampant “spiritual materialism” (Trungpa, 2002)?

It was precisely by means of entheogens that Strassman became aware of the need to participate in a sacred tradition: “The psychedelic experience had helped me establish a benchmark for intuiting the truth” (p. 290). It is providential that the book concludes with the author entering the gates of a Buddhist temple and having them close behind him, thus confirming that our ultimate abode is in the Spirit, which can only be properly accessed through the spiritual wisdom of humanity. Like the “finger pointing at the moon,” we should not mistake psychedelics for the liberating reality towards which they intimate. We would do well to remember that entheogens are not a panacea for our terrestrial ills. The journey from the illusory to the Real has been famously stated in the Heart Sūtra: “Gone, gone—gone for the other shore, attained the other shore; O Enlightenment, be blessed!” (Conze, 1972).

Strassman offers audiences an intimate exploration of non-ordinary states of consciousness where modern psychopharmacology, psychotherapy, and religion intersect.

His candid ruminations give us a rare glimpse into the inner world of a practicing psychiatrist and spiritual seeker, who provides a compelling phenomenological account of the entheogenic experience and its perils. Indeed, it is as if the reader is immersed directly into an unfiltered dimension of the author’s mind. Accordingly, the book stands out among others in this genre, and will surely be of great interest to mental health professionals, academics, and entheogenic researchers, as well as to the general reader.

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