

Reports and Reflections From a Psychedelic Researcher

Book Review

*Sacred Knowledge:
Psychedelics and
Religious Experiences*
by William A. Richards
Columbia University
Press
2015
244 pages

THIS IS NOT AN UNBIASED REVIEW. I have known Bill Richards for almost 45 years as a dear friend and colleague. I joined the psychedelic research team at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center in 1971, immediately after obtaining my Ph.D. During graduate school, I had learned to do research, but Bill was my mentor for doing psychedelic psychotherapy. I was able to have about five or six amazing years with Bill, Stan Grof, and a few other fellow explorers before local politics and federal regulations ended legal work with psychedelics. While I would happily have done such work without being paid, supporting myself and my family with some kind of day job, I was thrilled that this was not necessary. When those years came to an end I convinced myself that there were other more important things to do, including learning more about the model of psychotherapy that AAP represented, and took a series of hospital and agency jobs before moving into fulltime private practice. Bill was not able to delude himself in this manner. He continued to carry the torch for psychedelic research through the decades of its being suppressed by the government, taking day jobs here and there as necessary, without trying to convince himself that these were his calling or the most meaningful work he could do. He kept the faith while I fell asleep; and he is one of the most important people responsible for the current renaissance in psychedelic research. Reading *Sacred Knowledge* has been a wake-up call for me.

Sacred Knowledge is a work of masterful and profound scholarship that is written both informally and, often, autobiographically. Reading it feels more like visiting with its author rather than reading a treatise written by him. This is, of course, as it should be. Just as meaningful psychotherapy involves a personal relationship with a psychotherapist, so must a book that addresses the amazing and profound experiences encountered in psychedelic psychotherapy involve the author's own experiences in, and ideas about, this domain.

In this book Bill Richards does not limit his reporting of facts and speculations to psychedelic psychotherapy. He addresses at length the implications of psychedelic experiences for spirituality and religion. In this domain he is every bit the scholar that one might expect of a man whose (first) graduate studies were at the Yale Divinity School. However he also ranges far and wide into other territory, including medicine, neuroscience, philosophy, education, music, literature, botany, and the training of psychotherapists. In every case he makes a cogent argument for the great potential value of psychedelic experiences for people engaging with any of these domains. In every case he also reminds the reader that psychedelic explorations should only be undertaken in the most prudent manner, including careful selection of those for whom this could be expected to be safe and also careful selection of skillful companions to facilitate one's journeys.

This review may cause some people to delete *Sacred Knowledge* from their reading list because it sounds like the wishful thinking, if not delusions, of an author who has damaged his brain through the use of too many psychedelic drugs. I hope others will be intrigued enough to read this book because its implications for psychotherapy are enormous. Bill Richards' suggestion that psychedelics, properly employed, might impact many other fields, is of enormous significance. For example, the title of the book refers to the ways in which psychedelics can help us gain access to certain kinds of knowledge, including "sacred" knowledge, that might help us avoid destroying ourselves and our planet through war, greed, and ecological disaster. The fact that this knowledge can also help us live more fully, with greater joy, love, sense of meaning, and awe is the icing on the cake and the place where psychotherapists can make a direct contribution.

Sacred Knowledge has an epilogue entitled "A Concise Report of Insights from the Frontier Where Science and Spirituality Are Meeting" (p. 211). It has a small subtitle in parentheses: "(Some suggestions to consider and explore)." These insights seem a perfect sequel to Sheldon Kopp's Eschatological Laundry List, which first appeared in the pages of *Voices* (Kopp, 1970). Bill Richards' insights (pp. 211–212) are as follows:

1. In case you had any doubts, God (or whatever your favorite noun for ultimate reality may be) is.
2. God awaits and embraces us both as Ground of Being (Celestial Buddha Fields, Pure Land, The Void that contains all Reality, The Ground Luminosity Of Pure Awareness) and as Personal Deity (Lord Jehovah, Lord Jesus, Lord Krishna, Lord Buddha).
3. There are heavens and hells within each of us and they are magnificently designed.
4. The ultimate nature of matter and mind (if you take the mystics seriously) appears to be an ontological source or force of energy called love.
5. Consciousness, whether we like it or not, appears to be indestructible.
6. We are really more than we know of ourselves and can experience visionary content that does not arise from our personal developmental histories.
7. God moves in mysterious ways. When we trust and act in the world, a meaningful process unfolds within us. Each of us is still being created and crafted as a work of art.
8. There is truth in Myth.
9. True humility is all before the unspeakable greatness of Being.

10. Beauty may be in and through the eye of the Beholder, but it can be Absolute and incredibly magnificent.
11. We are all interconnected with one another, and perhaps with all that is; the Unity of Humankind, Gaia, and the Net Of Indra are very real.
12. The yearnings to know and understand truth expressed in science and philosophy are themselves encompassed within the temporal rivers that flow into the eternal ocean.
13. What is *is* — stretching beyond our most favorite words and concepts.



References

Kopp, S. (1970). An eschatological laundry list. *Voices: The art and science of psychotherapy*, 6 (2), 29.

There was, however, that turbulent sky. Fact was rain had been threatening all day. Those of you who have never stood in a high place and watched a rain storm move toward you across a valley have missed one of the things the words awesome and majestic were invented to describe. You're never sure you're seeing the rain itself: just a gray haze trailing below clouds drifting slow and steady as high sailed ships. Beautiful, yes, but in my present circumstances I felt something more than beauty. Seeing such a storm come at me now across that vast space I felt the astonishment of the sublime, which Edmund Burke defined in the eighteenth century as "not pleasure, but a sort of delightful horror, a sort of tranquility tinged with terror." It was as though I had been privileged with a glimpse of my own death, and found it the most terrible and beautiful thing I had ever seen.

— Philip Simmons
(2000) *Learning to fall: the blessings of an imperfect life*. New York: Bantam.