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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the rule breakers, the trailblazers and the nonconformists of the world. We need you now more than ever. Your value is in your ability to refuse, persist and just go change the damn world. Get to it, friends. The future is guaranteed to no one.

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”— George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

Usually, when people say they hit “rock bottom,” they mean it metaphorically. In my case, it was literal.

It was November 27, 2009, and there I was, one Canadian man flat on his back at the bottom of a cliff by the Brisbane River. I had come to Australia to further my education, enjoy an adventure, make some money, and maybe even fall in love. None of that was working out as planned. I was out of school, out of work, out of everything except maybe the capacity to make dubious decisions fueled by my ever-growing sense of despair.

That’s how I found myself climbing a twenty-meter cliff in the middle of the night. Alone. In dress shoes.

Needless to say, the climb didn’t turn out the way I had pictured it either. One missed grip sent me falling straight down to the ground below, where I lay with a broken leg and busted pelvis. It was the worst night of my life.

The great thing about hitting the bottom, though, is that there is no way to go but up. During my month-long hospital stay, I had a lot of time to think about what “up” might look like. One idea I kept coming back to was using ayahuasca for healing and growth. I had read a lot about the South American plant medicine, but now, life circumstances had made me determined to try it. I needed to turn things around.

I had no idea at the time, but my accident—along with the challenges that came before and after—was a valuable part of my journey from lost college student to successful social entrepreneur. When I look back on it now, I see that there really were no mistakes along the way, no matter how rough the route was at the time.

I’ve written this book to help you create the road to your dream life, no matter how many setbacks or obstacles you may encounter. I hope that by reading my story, you will see that it is possible to get your heart’s desire if you persevere.

This book tells the story of how I followed the threads of my interests and managed to turn them into a viable social enterprise—Pulse Tours and Ayahuasca Adventure Center—by successfully navigating challenges and engaging with others who shared my vision.

Pulse Tours is a spiritual adventure company operating in South American countries such as Peru, Colombia, and Brazil. Ayahuasca Adventure Center is a spiritual healing center located at the 2.2 million hectare Pacaya-Samiria reserve near Iquitos, Peru, where you can actually feel the air pulsing with plant, animal, and human life.

This book, however, is not only about what we do at Pulse. It’s about how we got there, and how other people can get there, too. Our work with traditional spiritual practices, consciousness-expanding plant medicines, health and fitness, and intercultural exploration can be part of that journey, but what I’m most interested in is showing people that getting out of their comfort zone, breaking through cultural limitations, following their passions, and making a positive impact on people and planet can bring happiness in a way that money or possessions or relationships simply won’t.

I will show you that it is entirely possible to create an amazing life and/or business that fulfills your dreams and changes the world in one. With some sacrifices, dedication, and hard work, you can make your desires a reality. My hope is that my story will educate and inspire you to embark on your own life changing adventure.

Chapter 1: Finding Gold

{H1} Into the Wild

Climbing out of the hole I’d dug for myself in Australia meant finding my own way in the dark. My body was healing, but my soul was still in turmoil. I was starting to see how experiencing an authentic ayahuasca retreat in the Amazon jungle might spark the inner healing process I so badly needed. It took years for me to make my way to Peru; by then I was fascinated with shamanic ideology and ready for the mystical adventure to begin. I had “taste tested” ayahuasca in New Mexico—more on that later—but Peru would offer a much richer experience.

By February, 2011, I was in the Amazon. I traveled the chewed-up gravel streets of Puerto Maldonado—thick with sputtering two-stroke engines and kiosks offering pirated goods—into the trees. As the roads got rougher, the scenery got greener. Arriving at the Shimbre Shamanic Center, I thought, “this is the rainforest.”

It was impossible to not feel completely at peace. Against the backdrop of endless miles of Amazon rainforest, the hilltop property was neatly manicured, though chickens scavenged confidently among a handful of playful dogs. The central ceremonial structure, the maloca, was more imposing than I had imagined from photos. The balmy air held the sweet, thick aroma of moist vegetation.

That first taste of ayahuasca in New Mexico had gotten my attention, but this was a whole new level of commitment. Here, I would experience an authentic ayahuasca retreat in the plant medicine’s native home. I was still quite a novice and extremely nervous about what was set to transpire. I was excited, but scared, too. Although I was convinced that I was doing the right thing, I thought more than once about backing out. In fact, I probably had that moment of doubt for the first twenty ceremonies I did. Participating in an ayahuasca ceremony can be grueling process; you can’t predict what you might face physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

{H1} Things Get Real

The maloca was set up like a royal structure, a round building high up on a great concrete platform. Screen walls let us see out over the swath of rainforest and swampland that led to the river. Stairs offered a path down into the jungle below. At about four or five in the afternoon, the shaman initiated the ceremony, gathering our group in the maloca. At that time of day in the Amazon, so close to the equator, the sun goes down at about six o’clock in the evening. By five o’clock, we were surrounded by the hazy, orange-and-pink glow of sunset.

The shaman’s entrance reinforced the mystical feeling. He came out dressed in the traditional clothing of the Chavin people, the earliest artists and architects of the Andes, known for their elaborately designed temples. In his hands, the shaman carried a hand-carved scepter and some rattles. His clothing set him apart from the participants, who were clearly his students, not his peers. He was a short, chubby man with a big pot belly, and he was not interested in sharing social niceties. From his spot at the rear of the maloca, he looked out at all of us sitting in rows on either side in chairs.

Traditional songs and dancing launched the ceremony. The shaman shook his rattles, whistled with his eyes closed, and chanted to summon the spirits of the medicine. After about thirty minutes, he handed me a coffee cup full of ayahuasca. I have to admit, it just looked revolting. And there was so much of it! In my one earlier ceremony in New Mexico, I had taken a concentrated syrup out of a shot glass, but this was a watery brew that filled a large coffee cup almost to overflowing. My stomach started to turn just looking at it.

Once served, I learned that I was not to drink it on the spot, but to take it down to a hut in the jungle below. To get there, I had to walk down a very steep, winding staircase built into the side of the hill. I had to navigate seventy-five stairs down a nearly vertical slope to reach the swampy forest floor paths that led to my cabin. Boardwalks covered the worst of the water, though many of those were rotten and would break when you stepped on them.

At this point I was essentially on my own. Each participant stayed in one of twenty-seven or twenty-eight huts set away from the others on tiny trails that ran into the jungle. It was a bit of a labyrinth, and somewhat complicated to navigate during the day, let alone at night. It was still daylight at this point, though the sun was nearly setting. I made my way to my hut and got settled in with blankets and a small foam mattress. I had my purge bucket by my side, since a common effect of ayahuasca is a cleansing purge, most frequently by vomiting.

I scattered around some personal artifacts I carried with me, including good luck charms, stones I had collected from different countries, crystals my sister had given me, and a small, hand-woven Shipibo tapestry. My friend Bahu had given me this last item, telling me that the Shipibo Indians of the Amazon jungle were the stewards of ayahuasca medicine.

I began to realize the profound nature of my undertaking. I was sitting there, about to drink the medicine, knowing it could take me off to a challenging place. It might be a beautiful journey, or a terrifying one. I took a moment to ground myself in my surroundings. I was in the Amazon jungle for the first time, huddled in my hut, surrounded by forest. I was ready.

I slammed back that coffee cup of ayahuasca like I would a glass of beer. There was no sipping or tasting. It was just bottoms up. I lay down on my mat and awaited the effects.

When the effects came, they were overwhelming. I had little context for this experience, but in retrospect I can see that it was one of the hardest ceremonies I’ve ever had, not just on a mental level, but physically too. I wasn’t prepared for navigating the physical world while I was fully under the influence of the medicine.

{H1} Wide Open

I felt the medicine’s power skyrocket only ten or fifteen minutes after drinking it. Within an hour, it had taken full control. I cannot accurately describe the worlds I entered, lying on the floor of my hut with my eyes open. The clear sky allowed the full moon to shine down through the trees and illuminate the tangled, gnarly roots and jungle foliage that surrounded me.

When I closed my eyes, I witnessed an alternate dimension of indescribable beauty. Bright colors and geometrical designs shifted before me. Unblinking eyes gazed benevolently at me, signifying a realm of universal intelligence. I heard a voice repeatedly saying to me, “Welcome.”

I was shown a corridor through which I was invited to walk.

A canine figure, perhaps a coyote, appeared in front of me. He was fully alert and stared down the corridor with a curious look, ears perked and eyes focused. He was not afraid, but moved cautiously ahead. After a couple of steps forward he would sit back on his haunches and observe. I was not confident enough to follow just yet.

As the visions came and went, my motor skills deteriorated. I entered a different space where a child stood holding out his hand to me. Again, I heard him say, “Welcome.” I was in some otherworldly version of a jungle, more pristine and peaceful than any on earth.

This was ayahuasca’s realm. Long vines hung down in tight, stringy coils. Clear water ran softly below the structure that supported us. I felt nausea building, but the ayahuasca would not let go so quickly. The sounds of the jungle—frogs, insects, strange things I couldn’t explain—intensified as the bright moon rose higher in the sky.

My thoughts turned to my family. I could see them all: my sisters, my mother, my father, my grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles. Feeling a profound sense of love and gratitude, I wanted to share this experience with them.

The turbulence in my digestive tract had reached an uncomfortable threshold at this point, and I hunched over my bucket hoping to expel the unpleasant sensation in my stomach. My intestines began to bubble, a concerning signal that tonight the purge would be coming from both ends. I tried to locate the door, thinking of toilets and tissue paper that lay at the other end of the winding jungle trails, but my vision was impaired dramatically and the unrest in my stomach forced me to suspend my face above the purge bucket on hands and knees.

All the while, my visions continued unabated. Even with my eyes open, I had graphic scenes playing out before me, with sexually attractive, scantily clothed female bodies standing in my direct line of sight. I was amazed by the intricacy and beauty I witnessed. Still, the nausea surged and I pulled the bucket even closer.

My mouth was so dry—the shaman’s rules forbade drinking water or eating food the day of the ceremony—I couldn’t imagine passing the acidic contents that now swirled through my stomach through it, but I had no choice. Without a trace of dignity, I unloaded the searing liquid into the bucket and felt the most immense sense of release and relief.

Exhausted from holding my pose above the bucket, I flopped down on the floor mat. I breathed deeply, though I could feel that the ordeal wasn’t quite over. My intestines continued to churn; I needed to find a toilet. I had two choices; I either had to coordinate my rubbery muscles and brace myself over the purge bucket in my hut or brave the swarm of bloodthirsty Amazon mosquitoes that lay in wait outside the door. Neither option was attractive, but I couldn’t just soil myself inside my hut.

My only acceptable option became clear. I had to get to the toilets at the top of the trail. Peeling myself off the floor, I managed to raise myself to standing. My legs wobbled and my perception was unreliable. I made my move, opening the door, feeling my way down the stairs and commencing the walk into the trail leading to the property above.

The trail quickly grew darker, concealing the path behind me. There was no going back. I had left my flashlight in the hut, but had no choice but to keep moving forward. Slowly, I edged one foot out in front of the other, grasping for whatever handrail I could find. My slow pace made the trail seem infinitely longer than I remembered. Could I have gone in the wrong direction? I couldn’t tell. There were dogs barking above, but I couldn’t distinguish from which direction.

I may have been going the wrong way, but I found a step. If I could only follow the steps, I knew I would make it to the top. Endlessly, it seemed, I climbed every tedious, tiring step. Step, step, step, and finally, there it was, a solemn glimmer of moonlight beaming down through the opening in the top of the stairway. I was nearing the top.

When I caught sight of the giant ceremonial structure, I was so relieved. Now I just needed to traverse the dark trails across the property. I had walked it countless times and was relatively confident I could find my way to the holy grail: a white building with double bathrooms. There it was.

Of course the light switch didn’t produce any light. I could barely see the empty roll that hung from the toilet tissue dispenser. The water tap produced nothing but a momentary gasp of air. Next door in the other bathroom I found the same situation.

At this point, I wondered if the shaman had turned off the water on purpose, if only to intensify the challenge. After all, that is one of the objectives of this work.

Exhausted and frustrated, I walked back to my room to lie down. The visual effects of the ayahuasca were still strong. Energetic trails of light and energy lagged behind my fingers as I moved my hands. I marveled at the motion of the light trails, but nothing could distract me from the fact that I had no water, I was desperately thirsty, and I still needed a toilet badly.

First I tried to sleep, but the ayahuasca kept me awake. Somewhere around eleven o’clock I realized there was no way I was going to be able to wait until the bathrooms were sorted out in the morning. I remembered another set of toilets I had seen the day before, in front of a different cabin. I was forced to once again venture onto the trail system in the dark, but was able to find two older structures with toilets. Again, I found no lights and no toilet paper, but one thing I did have: running water sourced from a rainwater catchment tank, rather than the main spring. My relief was overwhelming and I was finally able to relax and return to the comfort and security of my bed for a good night’s rest.

{H1} Aftershocks

When I woke up, I felt that I had just undergone a training exercise. It tested my mental resilience, strength of will, and independence. It put into perspective life’s more mundane challenges, things we often place too much emphasis on. Here, I could see that we are equipped to handle so much more. I was proud of myself for overcoming the struggle.

My first Amazon ayahuasca ceremony gave me a profound spiritual experience. Regular perception was pushed to its limits so that I was forced to consider the existence of a supernatural energy or entity. I’m not necessarily suggesting this was God, but rather a presence.

A welcome aftereffect of a ceremony like this is the feeling of lightness that comes from a significant purge. My insides felt clean from top to bottom. I felt like I had eliminated stuff that had been stuck inside me, physically and psychologically.

{H1} The Whole Picture

When I look back now, after years of running similar retreats for others, I can see that I was just beginning to explore the seeds of what would become my life’s work. At the time, though, I didn’t realize any of that. My thoughts were much more immediate. I wanted to explore my own limits, to investigate the boundaries of the universe. I needed to know if there was some type of higher existence I could reach by journeying through my own psyche. These plants offered the promise of experiencing a superior level of reality, perhaps a hint of what waits for us in death. I was interested in separating consciousness from ego and even destroying the ego for a moment in time.

I felt called to go deeper. I realized that all people should be able to have this experience. Being able to go to this place, this realm away from ego and memory, is an important part of being human. The shift in perspective offered by ayahuasca lets you see life as pure consciousness.

Some people expect an ayahuasca experience to help them find a new world, but to me, it was more about experiencing all aspects of the world that already exist. It was like uncovering a reality that has been there all along; you simply haven’t been properly equipped to see it.

What ayahuasca allows is something like taking an electron microscope and looking into the quantum movement of electrons in atoms. That stuff is there all along, whether you can perceive it or not. Everything is made up of these vibrating ions and particles, but you don’t see it unless you look for it specifically and unless you have a tool that can illuminate that scale of existence. Ayahuasca can be such a tool.

One of the active constituents in ayahuasca, dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, creates this channel into a new way of perceiving. People often describe their DMT experience of DMT, when consumed as an extract, in a very similar way. Most encounter spirit, God, the divine, or extraterrestrial intelligence. Many travel with their consciousness into the center of the universe and come to understand how the universe functions at the energetic level. They recognize the order and motive of everything we perceive to exist.

This world is always there. You just need to cut through the vines of your ego and your human perception in order to see it. There’s nothing inherently wrong with being human, but the human experience is incredibly enhanced by having knowledge of something greater.

I confess that even with all of the obvious benefits, I was pretty intimidated to continue with the retreat. At this point I was still a very entry-level participant in the world of ayahuasca. I was thrilled to have survived my first Amazon ayahuasca experience, but I knew it was just the tip of the iceberg compared to what could happen if I continued.

Instead of focusing solely on my own experience though, I’d like to introduce some other people who have come to ayahuasca and found themselves transformed by the experience. I will share several such stories in people’s own words throughout the book.

[BEGIN TEXT BOX]

{H1} Stories of Personal Transformation: Jolé Foy

Jolé Foy has done almost twenty ceremonies at the Pulse Tours Ayahuasca Adventure Center. She has grown from a place of uncertainty and illness to create a vibrant life and business making transcendent silver and stone artwork in her own studio and selling it around the world. She sells her work online through Lavender Star Designs.

“[When] I started looking into [ayahuasca], I found Tatyana [Tatyana Telegina is co-founder of the Pulse Tours and Ayahuasca Adventure Center] online. I ended up talking to her for about a year before I actually went to Pulse for the first time. The first time I went there was May of last year [2015]. I was dealing with things that most people do . . . traumas . . . and I was suppressing my emotions and lashing out in anger. Just wasn't very centered or anything like that.

“I did four ceremonies the first time. It was amazing. I learned to love myself, which I don't think I've ever done before. I also uncovered some trauma that I wasn't aware of, so I went back a second time. After coming home the first time, I felt more aware of myself and I started trusting my intuition.

“I decided to start trying different things. I tried silversmithing and I fell in love with it. I kind of had a feeling that it was something I needed to pursue, so I bought all of the tools and I read every book I could find and watched every tutorial. I built a studio in my home and I pretty much locked myself in and taught myself how to silversmith.

“[I had done] beading and simple stuff like that, but nothing that's near as involved as this. I went back again to Pulse for three weeks in January of this year [2016]. I had visions. [During] one ceremony, she [ayahuasca is often spoken of as a feminine presence] showed me my hands and she showed me the strength and dexterity and talents in them. The experience reaffirmed that that's what I'm supposed to be doing. I came home and in March I quit my job of ten years to design full-time. It was the best decision I've ever made. It's amazing to stay home all day and create beautiful things and people love it. I feel really lucky.

“Personally, I was emotionally shut off before and now I'm very aware of my feelings and I'm able to process emotions. I'm more open to other people. I was not open to other people at all before. I'm really grateful.

“Everybody at the [Pulse] center is amazing. I consider them to be very, very good friends. They're open. I can talk to them about anything. I feel like if I have an issue now, if I'm having trouble integrating a lesson or anything in general, I can contact anybody that I've met there. The people that were also at the retreat with me, those are going to be lifelong friends. I definitely made some amazing connections because of it. Tatyana especially, like, I've gotten really close to her. She's an amazing person.

“So, I went back and the second time I went I was a little shocked by the strength of the medicine. I did twelve ceremonies. The first ceremony was very, very overwhelming and I didn't think that I would be able to drink eleven more times. The most shocking difference between my first and second trip was just the strength of the medicine.

“I continued to work on everything that I uncovered during my first session. Wiler [shaman at Pulse Tours Ayahuasca Adventure Center] actually asked me to come back because even during my fourth ceremony, I uncovered a lot of things. He said he could help me with that. I basically picked up where I left off, so I would set my intention for what I discovered in the last ceremony. We would address that exact thing in the ceremony, whatever my intention was, that's what was addressed. Then something else would come up, so we'd work on that in the next one.

“When I came back, I noticed that my work was just . . . I was able to focus on it better and it's just gotten a lot cleaner. I feel like I have more ideas for designs. I don't really know if that's where they're coming from, but I definitely feel more inspired.

“It was also difficult to come back because before I wasn't allowing myself to feel anything or process anything. Then you're so different and you come back into a world that's exactly the same. Everybody else is the same, nothing has changed, but you still have to try to work those lessons in there.

“When I came home, I was feeling everything. It was really overwhelming because I'd never allowed myself to do that. I learned to just be emotional and acknowledge that I have emotions, and if I do experience anger, which I don't very often anymore, I'm able to look at it and see where it's coming from and address it from a place of being centered instead of just lashing out in rage like I used to. I would just be angry and not understand why or try to stop it or anything like that.

“I'm just emotionally a lot more stable for sure. That's been the biggest difference for me. That was one of the main issues I went to Peru with. I wasn't able to cry, like, I never allowed myself to cry, and certainly not in front of other people. Then, after my fourth ceremony, I was able to talk about sexual trauma that I had just learned about in front of twenty-five strangers. Not really strangers, but people I wouldn't talk about that kind of stuff in front of. I cried. I was just like, ‘Oh my God. I'm crying in front of these people and they don't even care.’

“The ceremonies can be hard. I had a ceremony where I was shown every horrible thing, every time I've hurt somebody throughout my whole life. There's a lot of things to see because I spent my whole life being angry and taking it out on people I love. I experienced all the pain I caused from their perspective. It was horrifying. It was a really rough night. I felt really ashamed and just like I was a monster. It was not a good night, but I forgave myself.

“Now I'm so much more aware of the way that I treat other people. I have a lot more empathy toward them. When I see people acting the way that I used to, instead of being like, ‘Oh, they're a jerk,’ I'm like, ‘Oh, they're suffering and they need love.’ I definitely look at people in a totally different way now.

“Professionally, the response I've gotten to my designs since I returned has been just overwhelming. It's crazy to me, having never been artistic before, to have people pay as much as they do for something that I created. I'm still really just kind of in shock that it's happening at all. The way that I've been designing pieces has been primarily custom orders. People will contact me and I'll show them all the stones that I have or find the stones that they need, and then build a design around it. I work with only sterling and fine silver. I hand fabricate.

“This is truly a labor of love for me. I'm still blown away that I get to sit here all day and play with beautiful gemstones and silver and fire. It's so much fun. I'm very, very lucky.”

[END TEXT BOX]

{H1} Reaching Beyond Self

Before we go much further, we should explore more about how the Pulse Tours and Ayahuasca Adventure Center came to be.

My first authentic ayahuasca experience was transformative for me, and I could see how transformative it was for the other participants as well. I knew I wanted to make this paradigm shift available for others. As it turned out, one of the most satisfying aspects of running our ayahuasca adventure center in Peru is to see people come in seeking healing they haven’t been able to get anywhere else, and witness their connection with the medicine. Sometimes participants will write to me after their stay, sharing that they’ve had an incredible encounter and achieved something they couldn’t even imagine. Even though they don’t really know me, they feel like they know me just by being at the place that I designed with heart and soul. When I get those messages, it makes enduring all of the uncertainty and challenge of entrepreneurship that much more worthwhile.

The center took shape over a number of years, with the help of my teammates, particularly my fiancée Tatyana Telegina, who now runs the center with me. The seeds were planted back in that hospital room in Australia, but momentum really took hold in 2012, when I led an adventure into the Amazon to have an ayahuasca ceremony for the infamous “end of the world” date of December 21, 2012. We traveled from Bogota, Colombia, to the city of Iquitos, Peru, where I experienced my first ayahuasca ceremonies under the Shipibo tradition.

Iquitos is one of the main hotspots for jungle tourism. People come to Iquitos and work with agencies that set them up with guides who take them through pristine jungle parks such as the Pacaya-Samiria Nature Reserve. It’s a great spot for jungle tours, so there are a number of jungle lodges throughout the area.

From the beginning, our programs mixed jungle tours and adventure with ayahuasca, though not integrated into the same day. We would go on a jungle tour, then do a four- or five-day ayahuasca retreat at someone else’s center. While staying at other ayahuasca retreat centers, our passengers spent a lot of time lying in hammocks, meditating, playing cards, and writing in their journals, but there wasn’t a lot of activity after the ceremonies. The participants weren’t exercising; everything was stationary. I had a feeling we could do more with this time.

By 2014, although we had some success working with other centers, we were scrambling to grow our own operation. Tatyana hadn’t held a job since we met and I had given up my job with the intention of taking what was then called just Pulse Tours to a new level—a full-time business—that would sustain us. We were getting busier and busier, and receiving rave reviews online.

Meanwhile, I was trying to negotiate a deal with one center to give us more availability and better prices; we were having trouble taking the regular price and putting a markup on it and then selling it. We were bringing a lot of business to the center, so I made a deal with one of the owners, agreeing to invest in building some extra cabins at their other property, near a maloca that was already built but not in use.

The plan was that we would bring our groups there and use the cabins I had invested in, while their shamans would conduct ceremonies for us in this one special, smaller maloca. It seemed like it would work well. A handshake and an ayahuasca ceremony would seal the deal, or so I thought. Unfortunately, during that night’s ceremony, the owner meditated on the deal and realized it was not going to work out after all. We were back to square one. That’s when I knew we were done working at the mercy of other people’s decisions when it came to our business.

We quickly realized we needed to build our own place, where we could play by our own rules. Once that decision was made, we had a ceremony where I visualized the operation. I received an image of the big sky at Libertad, a tiny native village near Pacaya-Samiria where we had already guided a number of jungle adventures. It’s on a wide open river and you can see the whole sky. Libertad was so unlike the inland retreat centers where we’d been working under a jungle canopy that blocked the sky and felt claustrophobic.

I conceptualized an ayahuasca center that was more active, a little less somber and a lot more fun than many of the other centers. I didn’t want everyone to just be sitting around. Instead, we would integrate the adventure of travel and the jungle environment into the whole experience. People would be traveling across the world to encounter this powerful psychedelic medicine that would take them into the deepest parts of their psyches and show them the infinite fabric of the universe. That’s an adventure! So many places we went to were very serious and took the fun out of it. The Pulse experience would be different. We were going to make it a jungle adventure and an ayahuasca healing experience all in one.

It made sense from a biological perspective. People were coming down to detox, to purge. Exercise—sweating, boosting your heart rate, and burning fat—could only add to the purification. On top of that, participants would get the well-known benefit of being in nature, interacting with animals, and breathing clean air. Scientifically, it followed that we should put it all together.

We took a little flak for calling our place an “adventure center,” because the accepted practice in ayahuasca circles was to maintain a very serious, solemn atmosphere. Our passengers (another name we give the participants journeying with us), however, are already very knowledgeable about the traditions; they understand where the medicine comes from. They want more. One early passenger gave us the feedback we needed to reaffirm that “adventure” would be a core concept for us. After her time with us, she said the active nature of the retreat was a valuable part of her experience. We knew, too, a more celebratory approach would help differentiate us from others.

Another way we stood out was by integrating a gym into our facilities. One of my pet peeves about other centers was that you couldn’t stay fit. You would stay there and waste away on the skimpy food and lack of activity. I designed our site to include a gym from the beginning.

Our vision of a unified experience also included animals; we have several animals on the site and everybody loves them. I wanted that welcoming vibe, where everyone smiles and treats each other with love and respect, so we added multicolored hammocks, artwork on the walls, and a library.

Some of my early experiences had been less than ideal, so I wanted to change that at our center. I had been through ceremonies that were preceded by difficult fasts—a practice considered legitimate in most Shipibo traditions—but I wasn’t convinced it was necessary to such a degree, for the average bear. Nor was the no-sugar, no-salt ayahuasca diet often prescribed. I tested the effects of diet myself one night while I was at Shimbre in 2011, eating pork and having a beer before a ceremony, and that night I had an incredibly powerful ceremony. I had also been to ceremonies in Brazil with the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV) religions that featured a huge feast before the ceremony, so I knew the fasting rule wasn’t written in stone. Although, I do not support nor recommend eating pork nor drinking beer before ceremonies!!!

I wanted people to feel nourished and safe, even as we asked them to take risks and expand their boundaries through ayahuasca and adventure. My role is a little bit like the coyote figure in Native American mythology: I meet people at the edge of their comfort zone and playfully coax them into a new world.

One thing I wanted to avoid was turning newcomers off from the experience simply because the preparation was unnecessarily harsh. That’s what happened when my father agreed to try ayahuasca. I had lobbied long and hard for him to experience what I was experiencing. On his sixtieth birthday, he came with my uncle to give it a try. Unfortunately, the center we went to at the time insisted on drinking a pre-ceremony purgative plant brew that made them so sick they abandoned their plans to continue. I was incredibly annoyed and vowed to take a different approach at our center.

Some people criticize us for not following protocol. They see it as irresponsible or lacking in respect for the traditions, but I see it as creating traditions based on my own experience, which is broader than most other people in the field. A lot of people have worked a long time in one tradition, but how many have immersed themselves in four different traditions, as I have? My hope is that people will see that I’m open-minded and inquisitive, always investigating things to get at the truth. I never blindly accept what’s handed down. Instead, I earn trust by trying things for myself before recommending them to others.

{H1} Slow Build

While the development of the Ayahuasca Adventure Center moved swiftly after the 2014 Brazil trip, I definitely took the long way to get there. Going from Canadian college dropout to successful businessman in the jungles of Peru would take a while.

After high school, I tried to enter the working world I saw my father and peers inhabiting, but I couldn’t settle on a path. I cycled through four different programs in four years of college. All of them were courses I selected by flipping through pages in a college catalogue, expending little effort to understand what the related job might entail. My father was working for a nuclear power plant in the technology sector, and I wanted to find something that would live up to the image I had of what he considered respectable.

Beginning in 2000, I attended Fanshawe College of Arts and Technology in London, Ontario, Canada. I switched from studying computer programming to electronics engineering and eventually cobbled together enough classes to qualify for a certificate in Electrical Techniques which I never actually collected. I loved the science, the theories, and design work, but the hands-on technical work was not my forte. One of my teachers actually said to me, “You should not be a technician. You are so full of shit. You should be a salesperson.” I had no idea how right he was.

My first job after college was—surprise—a sales job. It was listed in the paper as an air quality technician, which sounded similar enough to my college programs that I thought I could talk my way through the interview. That I did, but it turned out to be 100% sales. I thought the company was cool at first, but it was sleazy. They presented themselves as providing a service for homeowners to remove carcinogenic particulate compounds from their indoor air. Their solution was a negative ionizer with an electronic air filter that the lucky homeowner could own for a mere $3,000. The company went line-by-line through the phone book and called everyone to congratulate them on winning a free vacation if only they would invite us in to deliver the prize, along with a spiel on the air purifier.

For maybe six months, I managed to work the script. I dutifully informed families about the dust mites in their carpet and the evils of indoor air pollution before hauling in the forty-pound purifier that would miraculously pull a visible film of dust through its filter. I would then triumphantly hold up the filter as proof that our machine could clean their air.

I was never very good at pushing people. I probably lost about 20% of my sales with that company because I didn’t push people as hard as management wanted me to. The straw that broke the camel’s back was when I was sent to my hometown to sell these machines. Unbelievably, they wanted me to sell to my grandparents. I couldn’t do it. I realized then that I was selling something I was not comfortable enough to sell to my own loved ones. I quit. No more going into working people’s homes and conning them out of their hard-earned money.

Besides, I was interested in moving on to business-to-business sales, so I turned my attention to working my way up through an electrical sales company in Ontario. They were expanding into the oil and gas industry in Alberta. It was a good job for a while. I had a lot of autonomy, and Ontario is a fairly clean, developed area. I wasn’t necessarily in touch with how our work was effecting the environment, however.

As an avid follower of David Suzuki and the environmentalist movement, and a rural Canadian, I should have been more aware. I grew up in the countryside, reading books like *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, spending the days hiking around the forest, starting campfires and cooking on them. As an adult I continued to spend a lot of time in nature, hiking and connecting to the land.

Eventually, my job took me face-to-face with what the oil and gas industry was doing to the landscape I loved. I was sent to Fort McMurray in Alberta, home of the Athabasca oil sands. When I first moved to Alberta, I hadn’t really noticed anything. I lived in Calgary, where the facilities were small-scale. It’s not like they had big smoke stacks belching out black smoke. This was Canada. You couldn’t just do that, right?

It didn’t appear I was doing anything awful for the environment, apart from driving a lot. I remained unconcerned until I had harvested all of the low-hanging sales fruit in Calgary and I had to travel farther to get more contracts. I started driving up to Fort McMurray, where the monster facilities for Petro-Canada, Suncor, and Enbridge were. I had high hopes. This was the big-time we had been working toward all along.

What I saw up there, though, was horrifying. From twenty miles away, I could see megalithic smoke stacks bellowing out huge clouds of carbon dioxide and pollution. It looked like they were forming their own clouds. Then I came upon massive open pit mines that were like something out of a nightmare. There was complete destruction of the landscape as far as the eye could see.

I was appalled, and yet I was walking through it all with the maintenance managers and technicians, pretending it wasn’t bothering me. I knew, though, that I wanted this whole thing to stop. It disgusted me to think I was becoming one of them, capitalizing on this rampant destruction of the local environment. How could I be party to the toxic waste and tailings that were killing flocks of birds and leaching into the water supplies? That’s when I started to think about getting out of there, traveling to Brazil and moving on to something else.

My environmental convictions were telling me to move on, but I also had simpler motives familiar to any young man: I wanted to impress a girl. A Swiss girl. She had come to Canada as an exchange student in the late nineties, and I had kept in contact with her over the years. I felt I had never been quite good enough for her. She had traveled the world, and helped me recognize the limitations and faults of the cultural bubble that I was conditioned to, the small-town mindset I grew up with. I had the idea that a solo adventure in Brazil would prove to her that I had broken out of my provincial perspective.

Brazil was also the home country of Sepultura, one of my favorite heavy metal bands at the time. Their music was so raw and tribal-sounding, it felt like a perfect fit with my personality. I loved hot weather, and I wanted awesome beaches, hot ladies, and good music. Brazil promised all this with the exotic addition of a rainforest adventure. I was so excited.

I booked my trip over Christmas and New Year’s, when it’s freezing in Canada, but toasty on the beach in Copacabana. It was a blast. I spent time in a hostel, got to know some guys from the Netherlands, Australia, and England. I just traveled at will for a couple of weeks. Back in Copacabana for New Year’s Eve, I was offered a bartending job at the hostel.

The fates were smiling on me. Not only did I have a job, I seemed to have a magic wand where the ladies were concerned, and exactly the lifestyle I wanted. I would wake up and walk or run down the beach, getting a suntan while exercising in these handy outdoor gyms along the way. I felt free.

Technically, I was only free for six weeks, until my boss back in Canada expected me back. I really did not want to go back. I had a good friend, Henry, and a beautiful new love interest, Renata. But I had to go. On the way to the airport, I cracked. I shed a few tears, telling the driver that “leaving Brazil is like pulling the heart out of my chest.” He knew just what I meant and replied, “Well, I guess you know where to come when you want to find your heart again.”

When I got back to Calgary, I was just done. Done with winter, done with driving seven hours up to Fort McMurray for appointments with these massive polluters, everything. I was obsessed with Brazil, and started researching outfits that offered tours there. I had talked with some of those tour companies a few years earlier, but now I had experience with travel and foreign languages.

I threw together a résumé and ended up getting a job with G.A.P. Adventures, now called G Adventures. Guides and tour leaders had to be fluent in Spanish and Portuguese so I leveraged my previous trips to Spain, Mexico, and Brazil, which helped a lot. My sales skills came into play as well; I knew how to converse and deal with customers. I really sold myself in the interview process and within a couple of months was starting a training program in Central America.

Training was thorough. In the spring of 2007, I flew down for a two-week course that took us from Guatemala to Mexico, then to Belize. During the trip, we were put in real-life situations where we had to accomplish challenging objectives in strange, new places. They also taught us about business operations, how to maintain a budget, and how to deal with difficult passengers. We practiced all of the skills needed to be in charge of fifteen people traveling from place to place in a developing country.

My first assignment was in Costa Rica and Panama, beginning with a fifteen-day trip. We launched from San Jose, Costa Rica, and went to Puerto Viejo before crossing the border into Panama. We followed the Bocas del Toro Archipelago and continued up into the mountains of El Valle and then onto Panama City. Once in Panama City, I would say goodbye to that group of people, pick up another group, and do the reverse route.

When that first tour kicked off, I was thrilled. I had a great crew of people, some from Scotland, the United States, Canada, and Singapore. I made an event out of my initiation as a tour leader, with a contest. Whoever won got to shave my head. So I had a Mohawk for a little while.

I struggled with Spanish at first, but it slowly got better and better. I did the Panama experience five or six times, plus a bunch of hiking, biking, and rafting tours, which were my favorite. We’d take off on a three-day hike high up into the jungle and stay in rustic cabins in the rainforest of the Caribbean near Limon. It got messy in the rainy season, but the trips were fantastic. We did some white water rafting and some pretty intense mountain biking up in the Arenal Volcano.

Out in the wilderness like this, I was having the time of my life. I did run into some trouble in Panama City, though, when half of our group went to one bar and half to another, leaving me walking down the sidewalk alone, not particularly sober myself. From out of nowhere, I was attacked by a local man. He took offense to my attitude, I guess. I remember him saying “Well, you think you can just walk through our country and do whatever you want?” I probably made some smartass comment in return and things escalated pretty quickly.

Soon, I was a bloody mess and we were both hauled off to the police station for the night. Sometime the next morning, the cops took us to the local “courthouse,” which was a tiny little room off a hot, dodgy street where we sat on card table chairs for hours, sweating and bleeding. Several young military guys sat there staring at us with their hands on their pistols. They were dressed in olive green military suits, so they looked official, but the room was very strange. One of the walls was stacked from floor to ceiling with crates of empty beer bottles. In this dubious setting, the “court” proceedings unfolded. We pleaded our stories, and it was ruled that my attacker would have to pay for me to get my face fixed. It was all so surreal.

Meanwhile, my tour group was back in their hotel rooms, wondering what had happened to me. The last they had seen, I was walking away with the police, with a paper towel stuck to my face and blood running everywhere. We had a tour to Isla Taboga planned for the next day.

Plans would have to change, because I needed to get my nose put back in place. The options ranged from the expensive (time-consuming surgery by a legitimate doctor in a clean operating room with proper anesthesia) to the fast fix (find a guy who for $100 would stick a couple of metal rods up my nose and bust it back into place). Of course I chose the latter.

Then I was on my way back to Canada, where I had to greet my parents with a cast on my nose and two black eyes. I also weighed about ten kilograms less than when I had left. I told my dad the whole story, and he just looked at me and said, “Huh. Sounds like you were talking when you should’ve been listening.”

Right as he was, I was undeterred and ready to go back.

{H1} Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire

I ended up leading tours in Costa Rica and Panama until December 2007. That’s when I got notice I was being transferred to South America. My first tour there was long, a forty-two-day trip that started in Caracas, Venezuela, and coursed over to the Caribbean side to a town called Santa Fe. From there, we went directly south, stopping in Ciudad Bolivar, where we would do a tour of the Canaima National Park, Angel Falls, and the Grand Savannah. Continuing on, we visited Santa Elena, and then crossed the border into Brazil and eventually made our way by road down to Manaus. Then we were off on a jungle tour in Manaus followed by a five-day boat ride down the Amazon River to a city called Balam. We weren’t done yet. Next we traced the Brazilian coastline down to Salvador de Bahia. From Salvador, we would take a flight to Rio de Janeiro to complete the trip.

My first group had eight people, seven women and one man. That might have seemed like a lucky break for me at first, but it didn’t turn out that way. None of the ladies got along, and they ranged in age from eighteen to mid-sixties. They were all from different worlds, from the twenty-four-year-old ex-model who exuded cool to the two gentile old friends in their sixties.

Aside from the social interactions, logistics became a nightmare. Sleeping arrangements were tricky. There was an odd number of women and just one man, and he was not the best match for the group. Any other guy might have been fine, but this Australian man was fairly crude, coming from an all-boys boarding school background and having worked in the mines in western Australia. He was constantly rude to the women, who couldn’t stand him.

Usually when I was leading tours, I’d be able to get my own room and have a little space to myself. Not this time. It felt like we were together 24/7 for the entire six weeks, like we were on Big Brother or something.

I gamely got us started, however, just before Christmas, traveling from Caracas straight to Santa Fe. It was my first time there. Santa Fe is a small Caribbean town—not Caribbean in the stereotypical sense, but it’s on the Caribbean Sea, so it’s hot and sunny, a bit rough, and a little trashy.

If I’d entertained any thoughts about Christmas being an auspicious time to launch this journey, they were quickly dispelled by the events of December 24, 2007. Our group was strolling single-file through a sandy little town in the middle of the day, in sight of the police station, no less, when a barefoot kid came charging out of one of the alleyways with a gun in his hand. One of the women carried a big film camera on a lanyard strapped around her neck, and this kid grabbed it, trying to rip it off her. Her screams reached me at the front of the line. I ran to help, but this kid saw me coming a mile away.

He pointed his gun at me, and I was like, “Yeah, no thanks. You can have the camera.” He had taken it off the woman’s neck by then and dashed back into the alley, prize in hand. We reported it to the police, but they didn’t seem concerned at all, even though it happened practically outside their police station.

That was the start of an uncomfortable six weeks. I felt underqualified for the journey, because the territory was new to me, and very remote. We ran into lots of crime, black market currency conversions, and armed criminals. It was really rough-and-tumble country, overwhelming to negotiate with a group of cranky travelers gossiping and fighting the whole time.

Nonetheless, we finished the journey in Rio, landing there just in time for Carnival. The party atmosphere offered a reward for a year of hard work, biding my circumstances, creating opportunities, and following through with presence and determination. I had started with a goal in mind—get back to Brazil—and here I was.

Chapter 2: Whatever it Takes

A lot of people who hear about my travel adventures think, “I want to do that, too,” but they don’t know where to start, what to plan, or how to proceed. Even though I have largely learned by trial and error, I do recommend certain strategies to anyone considering adventurous travel.

{H1} Finding Funds

A big obstacle most travelers face is financing the trip. You might be surprised, though, by the number of ways you can engineer travel so it doesn’t cost a lot of money out of your pocket. With access to search engines these days, it’s really easy. The array of choices is always changing and new opportunities pop up all the time.

{H2} Teach English

One common way to secure some time in another country is to teach English, though not everyone is a shoo-in for this type of post.

In many places, you need a bachelor’s degree to teach English, but in some places—South America for example—you can usually get away with not having a degree. Franchises like Berlitz have prerequisites to weed out people who are only interested in travel or who aren’t educated enough to teach English.

My personal experience with higher education has been mixed, but I do recommend that young people pursue a bachelor’s degree. A four-year degree is the new high school diploma. Getting that piece of paper is often crucial to getting your foot in the door. Having a specialization that goes on top of your undergraduate degree can be valuable as well. Master’s degrees and doctorates can put you a cut above the rest.

The qualifications don’t end there. In about 90% of the chain schools, you will also need some kind of certificate, like Teacher of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or Teacher of English as a Second Language (TESL).

Once you have cleared the education hurdles, companies will ask about your practical experience. Agencies will want to know about any work—paid or volunteer—you’ve done in other countries.

Proving your credentials in some countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe can be even more complex. In some European countries, for example, you need to have a notarized copy of your degree. The reward for this hassle is that you can spend six months or a year in one country or region and earn money while you do it. In Asia and the Middle East, you can actually teach for a couple of years, save some money, pay off student loans, or just save enough money to travel even more.

In Asia, many jobs offer attractive vacation packages as part of the language-teaching deal. You can explore the region, see the culture, and even learn some additional languages at the same time.

{H2} Get Your Hands Dirty

One fairly recent addition to low-budget travel options with a cultural bent is WWOOFING. That stands for World Wide Opportunity on Organic Farms or Willing Workers on Organic Farms. Farms around the world welcome workers who help out on the farm for free, or for a small stipend, and get to spend time in the rural areas of a country. People with trades experience are good candidates for WWOOFING, but it’s also an option for anyone willing to get his or her hands dirty for a few hours a day in exchange for immersion in another culture. Anyone with horticultural, carpentry, electrical, or plumbing experience would be a natural candidate.

{H2} Work Your Way Up

About sixty countries around the world have working holiday visa programs that provide a short-term working visa. It was a holiday visa that allowed me to stay and work in Australia. This arrangement is different from a long-term professional visa, where you’re expected to immigrate into the country. The short-term version is meant to be temporary, but allows you to get a job in order to pay your travel expenses. Just be sure to do your research, since job availability in any given field can vary widely from place to place and tends to fluctuate over time.

Realize, too, that temporary gigs like this add value to your résumé in the future, not necessarily because of the nature of the work, but because international work experience demonstrates to future employers that you are an independent problem-solver. Any sort of travel is applicable, but honestly, if you just say you went to Thailand for six months, all that tells a prospective employer is that you were jumping off cliffs into beautiful blue water, maybe drinking buckets of vodka Red Bulls, and going to full moon parties. If, on the other hand, you’ve been in Thailand teaching English, volunteering at a wildlife preserve, or working at an orphanage, that shows you held down some responsibility while you were there, learned a lot more about the culture than your counterparts who were not working, and probably learned some of the language, too.

{H2} Semester Abroad

Field study abroad with a university program offers a reliable, predictable way to live and learn in a new country. My trip to Australia started with a college field study. We went to do a population density study on a species of crab on Vanuatu. It was just a three-week trip, but it gave me some leverage later when applying for a fisheries observer job because I had been studying species and taking detailed observations while in Australia.

I absolutely recommend that students take the opportunity to go abroad with their university programs. Not only do you get an international adventure and intercultural immersion experience, but you are working toward your degree at the same time.

{H2} Hostel Hopping

Thousands of hostels around the world offer not only cheap places to stay and a community of fellow travelers, but many have work options a well. If you go to a country and fall in love with it, you can always work or volunteer in a backpacker hostel. Pay is meager, but you will meet and get to know people from all around the world. Plus, you can usually get free room and board as well.

{H2} Travel Scholarships

I’ve recently become aware of something called travel scholarships. A number of volunteer organizations and travel blogger sites such as World Nomads or Volunteerforever.com sponsor travelers who will then write about their adventures. To get the gig, you submit writing samples, maybe a résumé or school transcript, to enter the competition for trips. Once selected, the company pays for your flight to some exotic destination with the understanding that you will write about it for them. A friend of mine has applied to World Nomads to go on a travel scholarship to New Zealand on a mountain excursion.

{H2} Crowdfunding

With the right networks and some social media savvy, crowdfunding can provide money for travel as well. Platforms like GoFundMe have worked well for some Pulse Tour participants. Not too long ago, a man from England made a video and ran a GoFundMe campaign asking the world to send him to Peru for some healing with ayahuasca. He got it.

Volunteerforever.com has their own fundraising platform; a quick Google search will reveal many others.

{H2} Build a Muse

If you want to get creative, there are lots of different ways to design travel plans that won’t break the bank. One method that resonates with me is what Tim Ferriss, in his book The 4-Hour Workweek, calls building a muse. Essentially, a muse is a low-input business, perhaps online, that funds your particular lifestyle.

Ferriss suggests that you calculate your target monthly income by making a plan that details what you want to do and exactly how much it is going to cost. Next identify market niches available to you to create an online shop to generate that income.

This approach can take time to build up, but can continue to make money long into the future.

{H2} Work Remotely

More and more, people are able to work remotely from anywhere in the world, whether for a company they already work with, or on a freelance basis. Using technologies like GoToMeeting, WebEX, and Skype, you can earn as you go . . . anywhere!

Pulse takes advantage of this option. Although our center is physically grounded in Peru, we don’t actually have an office. Our management team is me, Tatyana Telegina, Melissa Stangl, and the folks on the ground at the center, but we are rarely all in the same location. We have run the business this way from the beginning, and it gives us all incredible freedom.

Remote work is a fantastic way to do business. It may require a little creativity to convince an employer that you can get the same amount of work done at the same quality while working from a remote location, but it’s the truth. Most people are filling up the hours in the office just to meet their forty-hour-a-week minimum; in reality they could probably do their job in about 60% of that time. Working remotely, you have fewer distractions and wasteful meetings, freeing you up to more efficiently accomplish your actual work.

{H2} Currency Conversion

Another tip from Tim Ferriss is to leverage currency conversions in different countries. If you’re in the United States, making enough money to save a few thousand dollars, you can take that cash to a number of countries that have much lighter lifestyle expenses. If you’re creative about what you spend your money on, drink the local beers, and travel like a local, you can really stretch out a dollar. For example, US to Brazilian currency conversion is currently in our favor, at about double what it was when I was there in 2011.

{H2} Volunteerism

Money, of course, isn’t everything. Plenty of organizations offer opportunities to travel and volunteer. Volunteerforever.com is one example. Keep in mind that these opportunities are often not entirely cost-free. You may be spending money to go work somewhere, but you can get a lot of personal satisfaction out of it, as well as a valuable entry on your résumé.

What you’re paying for in a volunteer trip is an intercultural experience and a chance to help local communities around the world. Agencies like Planeterra (a nonprofit run by G Adventures) have operations set up in a wide range of communities.

{H2} Who Goes There?

People who embark on these adventures come from all walks of life. Anyone from age eighteen to sixty-five, or even older, can gain a lot from travel. Under eighteen is tricky, because many organizations are concerned about taking on the responsibility of an underage participant, but there are school programs for that age group. Similarly, some excursions are geared for seniors. There really is something for everyone.

{H2} Staying the Course

Planning a trip is exciting, but executing it can often be a challenge, especially on a psychological level. There’s a fairly predictable “culture shock curve” that travelers experience, and it can be helpful to know this before you begin.

Cultural adaptation runs a course that looks a bit like a sine wave. You start off in high spirits. You’re going on vacation! This honeymoon phase lasts a month or two, and then the curve starts sloping downward. Soon enough, it dips below the median line and you start feeling hostility. You’ve had enough of this culture! All you want to do is go home to familiarity.

It can be helpful to realize that it’s fine to pull back a bit at this point and regroup. Hole up in your hotel room with a Netflix series, or whatever feels comforting to you, and then re-enter the foreign culture refreshed.

The discomfort of integrating a new culture, however, means you are expanding your boundaries. You are learning something new, and that’s what it’s all about. When you start to feel a little bit nervous, you know you are entering a period of growth.

After a few months, your cultural adaptation curve will begin to head north again. You may start to find your foibles in this new environment humorous, even enjoyable. About six months in, you will start feeling at home in the new culture.

One interesting thing about the cultural adaptation process is that it happens in reverse when you return home. At first everyone is happy to see you, and all the familiar sights and sounds make you feel grateful to be home. Soon enough, though, people get used to having you back, routines return, and you remember all the things you didn’t like about your home culture. Reintegration takes about six months to feel complete.

The more travel you do, of course, the easier the integration and reintegration processes become. I’ve moved around so much that the culture shock curve has really tightened up for me. In a matter of weeks, I generally adapt to a new culture with no problem.

{H2} Learn the Language

Cultural integration goes much faster when you learn the language of the locals. Spanish is a great choice, because it’s the second or third most spoken language in the world. Spanish is relevant not just in Spain, but in the United States, all through Latin America, Canada, and the Philippines, where Spanish is the official language.

While language classes are often mandatory in elementary and high school, a lot of students think of the classroom instruction as a joke. I spent five years learning French in school but I couldn’t speak it for the life of me. It was only when I was chasing a French-speaking Swiss girl that I actually studied the language. Unfortunately, French isn’t useful in as many places as Spanish.

The other really useful language is Mandarin, which requires learning a whole new system of characters and culture. I found it incredibly difficult. To learn Mandarin, it’s helpful to study Chinese culture because there are a lot of cultural nuances in the language that are crucial to successful communication.

I suggest incorporating some language training in your college or university program. If you have a fascination with the south, learn Spanish and Portuguese. If you can’t wait to go to Europe, study Spanish and French. For Asia, look at Japanese or Chinese language courses.

In addition to helping you integrate into foreign cultures, language learning sets you up for a rich future. You make yourself that much more attractive to potential employers, even if you don’t have the specific skills a particular job calls for. The employer can see from the language and travel experience on your résumé that you are a person who can learn anything.

{H1} Down Under . . . Way Down

Of course, I didn’t start out an expert traveler. I’ve hit enough walls along the way, both psychologically and physically. We touched on this in the Introduction. A closer look will reveal how my rock bottom materialized, and how I began to work my way out of the quagmire I had made of my life.

In May of 2009, I went to Australia. My intention was to continue the university-level studies I had begun at Okanagan College in Canada, in 2008. After witnessing the destructive force of the tar sands projects in Canada and many social and environmental problems in South America, I had a new mission. I wanted to do something positive for the world and environment. When the opportunity arose to take part in a field study arranged by one of my professors—a conservation project in Vanuatu—I knew I had to go.

My environmental and academic ambitions, as it happened, meshed quite nicely with my personal goals. I was a young man seeking romance, and I had a vision in the back of my mind of falling in love with a beautiful woman in Australia. It may sound hokey, but I had held this vision for years, ever since a psychic told my sister Emily that I was going to go to Australia and meet an incredible, beautiful woman and fall in love. With that in mind, I was ready to stay longer than the three weeks of the university field study; I applied for a working holiday visa, which would allow me to extend my stay for up to six months if I worked for an Australian company.

Always eager for the next adventure, I not only spent time with my student group in Brisbane, but also applied to a university in Australia and got accepted. Such easy success seemed like a sure sign that I should stay. I could see myself doing studying in Australia, loving the tropical climate, and meeting the perfect girl, but the funding I was getting from the Canadian government didn’t pay the bills. It only amounted to about $300 a week on top of the international tuition. Going to school in Australia would cost $18,000 a year just for tuition, plus living expenses.

I had been getting some financial support from my family. With that, I may have made my dream scenario in Australia come true, if it weren’t for the pesky little economic meltdown of 2008/2009. My parents were quite stressed because they lost about 25% of their retirement investments. My father said, “If you want to stay in Australia, that’s fine, but you’re going to have to do it on your own dime.”

Okay, I thought, I’m on my own. I wasn’t worried, though. I naively assumed that I’d just be able to find work, save up lots of money, and be able to pay my tuition and living expenses. Everything would be awesome. Of course, that’s not quite what happened.

{H1} Selling Out

I was fairly smitten with Brisbane right away. I wanted to stay. I immediately started studying the newspaper for jobs, and applied for a sales and marketing gig on my second day in Brisbane. The $70 I had to my name bought me the second-hand shirt and tie that saw me through the interview. Not only did I get position, but I started the next day with an extremely attractive my trainer named Gemma. I was infatuated with her, and glad to have her tutor me on my new job: door-to-door, commission-only sales.

We sold automotive servicing packages, little 8-1/2 x 11-inch cards with service discount coupons on them. It wasn’t glamorous work, but I made four sales on the first day. Here I was, with a fresh $250 in my pocket, working with a super-hot girl in an amazing part of the world. I thought it might actually work. If I could pull in $1000, $1200 a week, I’d be in good shape.

When my school group was headed back to Canada, I had no trouble deciding to stay behind in Australia. I didn’t have enough money to pay to change my flight, so I forfeited my flight home, which seemed like a fine bargain. The honeymoon period didn’t last long, though; after a few weeks it became apparent that Gemma was not interested in me and the initial bonuses I was getting at work started to run out. I met some good friends, but it became increasingly difficult to bring in enough money to save anything after paying rent, bills, and lifestyle expenses, even though I lived fairly frugally, renting a room in a three-bedroom house.

After two or three months, I started to despise walking around neighborhoods knocking on doors. Some days were both grueling and dispiriting; I’d spend ten hours walking around in the hot sun, knocking on doors and getting told to get lost, all the while watching for dogs around the corner. Dogs were a real problem; a couple of times I had to run from vicious dogs and jump over fences to get away.

Honestly, my dream job turned out to be the worst sales job I ever had. I was humiliated by having to interrupt people while they were eating dinner to try to sell them this piece of crap. I didn’t like getting pushy with people. I would put on a smile and talk to people, but it wasn’t like we were having real conversations. Instead of building a relationship, I was only interested in their money. I loathed the work, but felt I had to do it to pay my rent. Meantime, fall was approaching, along with new tuition payments. I didn’t have the resources to make it work.

With my school start date deferred to January, I was very discouraged. I wasn’t getting any closer to my dream of continuing my studies, and I was looking for yet another job. I started to regret my decision to stay in Australia and wished I had gone back to Canada with my cohort. Government funding would have allowed me to continue my studies, and I probably would have still received some support from my parents. With a little extra part-time work, I could have made it through to my bachelor’s degree.

Getting a degree was an important goal. I was twenty-eight years old and had tried many college programs without finishing any to my satisfaction. I felt naked without college credentials. As I grew to dislike sales work more and more, I wasn’t able to switch into a new profession without them.

I didn’t know what to do next. I was an environmentalist who wanted to do something to help the world, and yet, I spent my days doing meaningless sales work. I recognized that the more you do something, the more likely it is you are going to continue to do it—you are getting better at it and solidifying a pattern of behavior—and I didn’t want to get stuck in that trap. I was desperate to stop the cycle.

That summer in Australia, I frantically applied to all kinds of jobs, but the Australian economy was fairly protectionist after the financial crisis. Most companies were strict about hiring Australia or New Zealand residents only. At the same time, my visa was running out. The working holiday visa allowed me to work for the whole year, but only for six months at any one company. The higher-level, more professional sales jobs I applied for never panned out because the companies were reluctant to hire and train someone who was leaving after only six months.

{H1} Nowhere to Go but Up

I was absolutely stuck. I was just trying, trying, trying, and trying, but getting nowhere. Depression hit me hard at this point. I remember one day riding around Byron Bay with some friends, who were all laughing, joking around, and enjoying the beautiful scenery. Except me. I was just sitting there in the car, locked in my own head, worrying about everything. I thought, “What the fuck?! I’m down here in this incredible place and I’m miserable.” My thoughts actually turned suicidal. I realized that it was a good thing my mother loved me so much, because if it wasn’t for her, I might just disappear.

The frustrations kept on mounting that fall. I continued to get turned down for work. Desperate for solutions, I finagled a way to get a de facto visa that would let me work in Australia permanently. The de facto visa requires a long-term relationship with an Australian citizen, which I did not have, but there was no way to get past the recruiters without that document. So I got creative, and manufactured a visa that would get me in the door that led to a new, salaried job to start in November.

Finally, some of the pressure was off—I looked forward the comforts of a company car, cell phone, and computer, along with a promising commission structure. I still didn’t have any actual money, though, so once again, my university start date slid into the next term start.

I was still deeply unsettled, so maybe it is not surprising what happened next, although I certainly did not plan it. One night not long after I started working at the new company, I went out to the nightclubs with a friend, had my fair share of whiskey and bourbon, but made it home by midnight. I was still restless, so I went for a walk down to South Bank Park and Kangaroo Point, a ridge that extends out into the Brisbane River. The Point features a twenty-meter, sheer cliff that Brisbane residents climb all the time. I had seen people scramble up this rock with harnesses, ropes, helmets, and spotters. But that night—it was November 27, 2009—I was down there by myself with no equipment. The cliff looked totally harmless, wreathed in pink and purple Christmas lights. It looked like a giant pink marshmallow. How dangerous could that be?

I ambled over, touched the rock with my hands, looked up, and just started climbing. I don’t think I ever really intended to go all the way up, but it was fun, so I just kept climbing. Once I got past the halfway mark, I thought, “I can probably go all the way up.” I almost got there. I stalled maybe two meters from the top. I could see the wispy grass above me, but there was an overhang between me and solid ground. I couldn’t find any grips to grab onto. I was stuck.

My first instinct was to go back down, but I couldn’t get a hold on anything with the slippery dress shoes I was wearing. When down didn’t work, I went back up to where I had gotten stuck, but couldn’t achieve the stability I’d had just moments before. (I was too freaked out at the time to notice how my physical predicament mirrored my life’s trajectory to date.)

Panic set in. Shaking, tired, and scared, I looked around and saw an outcropping I might be able to reach if I jumped over to it. So I jumped. And missed, falling straight to the ground about fifteen meters down.

The impact was crushing. My left leg exploded at the femur, which was busted in three different places and sticking out of the side of my leg. The breaks tore the skin across half of my thigh and pulled it up. It was gruesome. My leg, however, may have been the least of my problems, as my pelvis absorbed much of the impact, splitting clean in half right in the middle—a vertical shear fracture—and jutting upwards into my abdomen.

I can still feel the impact to this day, although at the time I was in a state of shock. I didn’t have a lot of feeling in my leg and pelvis, but I knew something was really wrong because I couldn’t move. From my landing place in the gravel, I could see some teenagers chilling out down in the park, so I started screaming for help. My voice was muffled because the chunk of bone in my abdomen made it hard to get enough air. The kids ultimately heard me, though, and came over. The first thing one guy said was, “Holy shit, dude look at your leg!” I just begged them to call an ambulance. In minutes, I was on my way to a nearby hospital with a needle in my neck sending me gratefully off to La La Land.

Whatever they gave me made the next few hours bearable, even enjoyable. I was so high I laughed hysterically while they cut off my jeans and pulled my leg back into place. It looked like a wet noodle. I couldn’t stop laughing.

I spent the next few days getting stitched up and outfitted with a strange exoskeleton apparatus the doctors used to hold my bones in place, getting some relief from a morphine drip, and waiting for surgeries. Soon I was the not-so-proud owner of a titanium rod that spanned from knee to hip and a titanium plate screwed into my realigned pelvis.

If there was any silver lining in the weeks I spent healing in the hospital suffering the indignity of complete incapacitation, bedpans and all, it was the time I got to spend just hanging out with my mother, who had traveled from Canada to be at my bedside.

Otherwise, I was alone with my thoughts, and my thoughts were grim. The accident brought up some childhood traumas and grief from the past, putting me in a psychologically fragile frame of mind. Plus, I had racked up $40,000 in medical bills, I didn’t have insurance, and I didn’t have any money. Meanwhile, I was hooked on painkillers in the hospital—I always took the maximum dose every time and had to ask for new prescriptions sooner than I should have. And I was looking at four months on crutches. My circumstances had gone swiftly from bad to much, much worse; it was as though the universe was just telling me, “Leave Australia. You are not meant to be here. Go.”

{H1} A Seed Is Planted

As I was lying there all busted up and thinking about what a disaster the past year had been, I remembered what I had read years earlier about ayahuasca. I knew it was something I was eventually going to do because there was so much psychological garbage going through my mind that needed clearing out. In the hospital, I got really serious about doing it. Honestly, it scared the hell out of me. All of the things I heard about ayahuasca indicated it was an insanely potent, powerful psychedelic. When you took it, you confronted all your demons, your past traumas, and any hidden parts of your psyche. All of this was supposed to come up during the ayahuasca ceremonies, and those were exactly the things I knew I needed to face. Ayahuasca represented a way forward for me, a way out of the mental misery I was enduring on a daily basis.

I didn’t talk to many people about my interest in ayahuasca at the time. It was only a few years ago, but most people considered plant medicine a fringe, subculture scene. I did write in a journal, though, to help me deal with everything that was coming up, and some of the writing was very intense, though enlightening. I visualized the garbage I was carrying around as little orbs, each one of them containing some type of self-defeating program, residual trauma, or blockage that led to all of the stupid things I had done in my life. These orbs of negativity floated around me; I was carrying them everywhere I went. From all of the research I had done about ayahuasca, I felt like it offered a way out of this turmoil.

Thank goodness for the manager of the solar company I was working for at the time. He was a motocross racer, so he knew about serious injuries and empathized with my situation. Incredibly, he kept me on staff while I was in the hospital, working with customers I had gone to see before the accident. I actually sold about $50,000 worth of equipment during my stay in the hospital. He thought I was a superstar for that, so I continued to work with him, selling subsidized solar panel installations that would allow Australian homeowners to sell solar power from their homes back into the grid.

It was good work, but I wasn’t feeling great. I continued popping Oxycontin like it was going out of style, and partying with friends I’d met at the door-to-door sales job. It became clear that the long-postponed April start date at university wasn’t going to happen. I didn’t want to stay, anyway; I felt isolated living so far from my family. Then, in March 2010, I got a letter from my dad saying that my childhood dog was on her last legs.

We’d brought Molly into the family when I was in sixth grade, after I had researched breeds and made my case to my parents for either a Border Collie or an Australian Shepherd. I begged them for years before I found an ad for an Australian Shepherd- Border Collie cross puppy for $30. I spent so many days training her and hiking with her in the forest behind our house. Dad’s letter brought the sad news that at seventeen, Molly’s hiking and playing days were over.

{H1} Detours

That letter gave me the last bit of evidence I needed that it was time to pack up my Australian life and head back to Canada. On my way back, I decided to stop in Peru to visit an ayahuasca center I had been researching since my days in the hospital. I had started paying attention to the ayahuasca community, and heard a lot about this place, so I flew to Lima from Los Angeles instead of heading directly home.

I had never been to Peru, though I had traveled in almost every other country in South America, and I didn’t enter the country with much of a plan. I knew the ayahuasca center was holding a retreat on a certain date, but I didn’t contact them, because I knew I couldn’t really afford it. I was hoping I would just walk up to the gates and the spiritually enlightened group would naturally want to help and heal me, so they would let me in.

Surely I looked like a sorry case, since I had run out of Oxycontin—right before I left Australia, the doctors refused to prescribe anymore—so I was going through the most hellish withdrawal imaginable. It was like nothing I had ever experienced before, not at all like a hangover where you just feel a little off for a day or two. No, this started twelve hours after I took my last pill in the middle of the day. By that night, the cramps in my back were so bad I couldn’t sleep.

The doctors had told me to wean myself off the pills, but I didn’t listen. I couldn’t control my consumption, so I opted to go cold turkey instead. That was a huge mistake; I just lay there in agony. The muscle spasms and creepy-crawly twitchy feeling were unbearable. I couldn’t drive or anything. It was simply too much to take, so I went rummaging in my pill bag, turned up some ibuprofen and some acetaminophen with codeine in it, which was helpful. I got more codeine, so that eased the agony as I headed to Peru, though I wasn’t in the best shape to deal with the 3,400-meter elevation in Cusco.

Not surprisingly, I got altitude sickness right away. I didn’t suffer from edema, but the fatigue was really severe. I camped out in my hotel room for days. If I had to get up and go anywhere, I was out of breath and almost passing out. The steep landscape made it very hard to get around.

A few days of rest helped me acclimatize to the altitude, so I decided to get up and try to socialize. This impulse led me straight to Loki Hostel, which had a reputation as a party hostel. I got there only to meet a crew of Australians celebrating Australia-New Zealand Army Corps day, or ANZAC day, a major holiday in Australia and New Zealand. The main activity on this holiday was drinking, and drinking was something I was very good at. Plus, I had just come from Australia, so I felt a bit of a fraternal connection with these guys.

After a full day of drinking games, things got even crazier. We headed out to a discoteca in the main square and partied with a whole bunch of people, dancing it up, having a good time. Around three o’clock in the morning, I left to go back to my hotel, which was very different from the idea most of us have of hotels. It was a small, traditional guest house, on a dark, cobblestone back street, surrounded by huge stone buildings and walls. Cusco has maintained and restored a lot of their ancient stonework, so I was looking at these stones that were fitted together almost seamlessly and had stood for thousands of years.

The front of my hotel was one of these tall stone walls, with no windows at all, only a looming set of iron-hinged hardwood doors. I had to knock on the doors and hope someone would come out and open them. I stood there smoking a cigarette in the street at three o’clock in the morning, when out of the darkness, a car pulled up beside me. A guy jumped out of the passenger seat and the next thing I knew, he was in my face with a machete. In a quick blur of activity, two more men got out of the back seats and cleaned out my pockets. They took my wallet, my phone, and my money. Everything was gone. They even stole my ChapStick! Inside maybe forty-five seconds they jumped back in the car and drove off. The robbery was lightning fast; I didn’t know what had hit me.

I finally made it into the hotel, where I attempted to sleep off the shock and the drinks. In the morning, I struggled to come to grips with what had happened the night before. Surely I couldn’t be penniless? I checked the depths of my pockets and came up with one bill for ten Peruvian soles, which was about three US dollars. It was enough to buy me some soup from a local market for breakfast. It was delicious.

Pleasure soon turned to pain, though, when I started to feel nauseous a couple of hours later. I came down with the most violent case of food poisoning I have ever heard of. I spent two day holed up in my hotel room, violently purging from both ends, barely making it from bed to bathroom and back. I could see I was simply on the wrong path. I was getting handed smackdown after smackdown.

All I wanted was to go home to mommy, to a place where I could recover. That meant making the detestable call back to Canada asking my dad for enough money to fly home. I got the regular speech, of course, about how much he hated paying for us kids to travel the world and how we should just settle down and get jobs. But in the end, he said, “Okay, fine, I’ll buy your flight home, but this is the last time.”

{H1} The Winding Path Home

I was relieved, but my adventures on this journey were not quite over yet. On my way from Lima to Cusco at the beginning of the trip, I had made a friend who encouraged me that I was on the right path with my interest in ayahuasca. I had been standing in front of the bus station having a smoke with everyone else, and caught sight of this guy who intrigued me. He looked like he was from British Columbia—sandy blonde mop of hippie hair, wild beard, and rugged clothing—so I approached him.

I complimented his Native American tattoos and asked if he was from BC. He was, indeed, and we chatted together for the entire bus ride. I discovered he had been in Peru doing an ayahuasca retreat in the jungle. He said it was incredible. He had nothing but good— albeit challenging —experiences with the medicine, and also mentioned that he was involved with the Native American Church in New Mexico.

He had come to New Mexico from British Columbia on a golf scholarship, of all things. He started out super preppy, sports-minded, and generally very straightedge, but ended up disillusioned and angry about the area’s history and the way Native Americans were treated by the Europeans. He wound up dropping out of university to join the Native American Church. His native name was Bahu, and that’s how I knew him.

Bahu got deeply involved in the plant medicine community in New Mexico, participating in ritualistic religious ceremonies that used peyote as a sacrament. He had even smuggled some peyote in a jar down from the States into Peru. When we met, he invited me to go and take some peyote with him at some point during our stay in Cusco, but we parted ways upon arrival, and I lost several days to the altitude sickness, mugging, and food poisoning described earlier.

I didn’t talk with Bahu again for five days or more, but after I changed my flight, he called me up at the hotel and we traded stories. His week had been at least as spectacular as mine. Hiking in the hills overlooking the city, he found a place to meditate high in the mountains. It was the perfect spot for meditation, until he fell into a trance and tumbled off the rocks. He emerged from the hospital a few days later all busted up, with bruises and cuts all over his face, arms, and shoulders. We were quite a rough-looking pair after a week in Cusco.

Meeting Bahu was really a turning point for me, though I didn’t know it at the time. He invited me to meet him the next day to do a peyote ceremony up in the mountains. He brought all of his tools—feathers, crystals, and Native artifacts—and initiated the ceremony by chanting some Native American songs that he learned in New Mexico, creating his sacred space. The peyote was in powdered form, mixed with water to turn it into a paste. It tasted horrible.

I didn’t have a lot of the peyote because I was a little bit apprehensive about trying it for the first time. The effect was mild, and we spent the day exploring Inca ruins up in the hills, visiting the Temple of the Moon and some other places. We rented horses and rode around all day. It was beautiful, but I learned another lesson that day: the sun is really powerful at that elevation. On top of all the other damage my body had recently suffered, I added the worst sunburn of my life.

Sunscorched but elated to have met Bahu, one of my first true teachers, I was ready to head back to Canada for a while, knowing in the back of my mind that I had an open invitation from Bahu to come to New Mexico to do an ayahuasca ceremony with his group.

{H1} Working it Out

Once back in Canada, I needed to get work and earn some money. As it happened, my father, my uncle, and two of my cousins had started up a solar panel company in response to Ontario’s newly minted feed-in tariff program, which dovetailed perfectly with what I was doing in Australia.

I worked for them for a few months in a sales role, but ultimately I was determined to move into the environmental sector. That summer, I located a job as a fisheries observer for marine research in British Columbia. The job involved riding commercial fishing boats—bottom draggers, trawlers—for a few days or weeks at a time. It sounded like joining the cast of Deadliest Catch. The fishermen would bring up a net full of 10,000 pounds of fish and dump it on the deck, where I would document the species of fish they were catching, what they kept, and what they tossed overboard. The goal was to monitor the people who were extracting natural resources in order to minimize environmental damage and preserve species.

I convinced them I was suitable for the job, since I had the required one year of post-secondary education, which I earned at Okanagan College in 2008/2009, and experience traveling the world with my backpack. They knew I was suited to the adventurous, rugged, and nomadic aspects of the work. They also knew I had experience working with diverse groups of people, which was perfect because this was a particularly sensitive position. The fisherman didn’t particularly want to have someone on their boat watching them and writing down everything they were doing. I never felt like an outsider, though, perhaps because of the close quarters.

Picture me on a tin can, floating in the middle of a vast amount of water and space, yet unable to walk any further than the boundaries of the tin can for two weeks. The machinery on the boat was constantly running; huge cranes pulled up the nets while the boat got slammed around by waves. The fishermen were true professionals, and really, really tough guys. Their job was dangerous, the weather was temperamental, and it was wild to be out there in a storm.

A big storm hit us on my second or third trip. I was hired to go aboard the Viking Moon, a sixty-foot aluminum boat. It was really light and high in the water before it got filled with fish. We were going out to fish thornyheads, which are a delicacy on the Japanese market. The place to go for thornyheads was way up to the top of the Queen Charlotte Islands, and this boat was really slow.

All the fishermen were complaining about how the guy who owned the boat was a terrible penny pincher; he came from a wealthy fisher family, but had squandered away a lot of their money. Running these boats is expensive. You’re burning diesel fuel, paying for food, and of course paying the fisheries observer’s salary. We had gone a long way on this trip, but the nets weren’t coming up with much. Morale was pretty low, and here I was on a boat with a dozen angry fishermen, rough-and-tumble guys fresh from the oilfields or logging operations, many of them hard drinkers and tough talkers. It got pretty tense even before the hurricane winds hit.

The storm caught up with us in the middle of the Queen Charlotte Strait; the 100-kilometer-an-hour winds and massive waves assaulted our boat. We were running light, just bobbing up and down in this big boat, getting smashed by waves, and rolling left and right.

At one point, I was up in the cabin with the captain looking around at everything wide-eyed, half super-excited and half scared to death. Seeing these thirty-foot or even fifty-foot waves rise up in front of you is pretty incredible. It’s tough to even stand up.

That night, I was down in my state room with the door latched open so I could see out into the galley. From my bunk, I was watching one of the fishermen sitting at a table when we got broadsided by a huge wave. My side of the boat went down, so I just rolled up against the wall in my bunk. Meanwhile, this other guy was thrust off his seat and flew in mid-air from one side of the room to the other. The boat was hanging at a ninety-degree angle.

It could have ended badly, but the boat ended up righting itself. The trip continued through several more storms. We were docked up a lot. Finally, as early winter set in after forty-four days, the trip was called off.

Before it was all over, we did have one tow that made up for a lot. When the guys pulled up the net, they knew they had a heavy catch. It looked to be about 7,000 pounds of fish, and everyone was thrilled. Then they dropped the net.

Inside was a 3,000-pound basking shark. Incredibly, it seemed to still be alive. I tried to save it. Its gills were just packed with fish, so I figured it was having trouble getting oxygen. I washed it off with a hose, pumping saltwater through its gills trying to revive it, but it didn’t survive. We had to use the crane to lift it over the side of the boat, which was pretty amazing, yet sad, to watch.

In August of 2010, when I first went out to Victoria, British Columbia, to do the three-week training program for this job, I got a call from Bahu, who was hosting three ayahuasca ceremonies at a private ranch in a remote corner of New Mexico. I mentioned something to my employers about a wedding I had to attend and took a few days off my training to make the trip down.

At this juncture, I was an ayahuasca virgin, since I didn’t actually make it to the retreat center in Peru. I was scared going into the ceremonies, but I knew it was something I needed to do. I was ready to engage with the medicine and see what it had for me. I didn’t know it then, but I was about to learn many of the things that would lead to the business I eventually started and the life I now lead. One of the things I have learned from ayahuasca, though, is that everything, even all the regrets I’ve had and all the mistakes I’ve made, all led me to where I needed to be. This was just a first step.

{H1} Desert Nights

I arrived in Albuquerque, New Mexico on a Friday night. It was my first time in any of the southern states, and I loved the gritty, rocky, rugged landscape from the start. Anticipation for my very first ayahuasca ceremony made me jittery, but excited. This ceremony would be a rite of passage into a more mature version of myself, and I was eager to begin.

I had a beautiful drive out to a place called Gila, New Mexico, through wide open space and incredible scenery. There I was reunited with Bahu, who was busy preparing sage bundles with his girlfriend, doing yoga, and getting ready for the ceremony.

All of the participants, including the shaman, were Americans. The shaman described the upcoming experience as boarding an airplane together, traveling around up in the sky, and coming back down together. He explained the science of the medicine, and the origins of the particular batch of medicine he had brought from Peru. It was a concentrated, thick syrup made with ayahuasca and chacruna, the traditional Shipibo composition of the brew. He cautioned that it was very strong and very high quality.

Etiquette was simple. Stay in the ceremonial space, don’t talk, don’t flash lights around in people’s eyes, and try not to make much noise. We sat in a screened-in, second story room with views of an endless sky filled with the creamy oranges, yellows, and pinks of sunset. The stage was set for a spiritual experience; the surroundings felt energetically charged.

I didn’t know what to expect. I may have been a little overconfident, thinking that my experiences with mushrooms and LSD would have prepared me for what was to come. Still, I was nervous about what the universe had in store for me. Just before the ceremony, I went outside to ground myself. I took some sand in my hands and rubbed them together, Gladiator-style, and looked up at the sky, saying, “Show me what you’ve got!”

{H1} Boarding the Plane

I had a feeling I was in for something big, but I had no way of knowing how powerful the experience would be. Anyone who has used ayahuasca can attest that it’s really impossible to fathom until you encounter it personally.

The shaman offered up doses in shot glasses. He had drawn lines on the glass so you could gauge how much you were taking. I took a full shot glass the first time. Everyone else took their doses and we all went back to our personal spaces.

The retreat providers had set up some pillows and blankets, and we were encouraged to bring a comfort object as well. I had a small travel pillow, crystals, stones, bones, feathers, and the small Shipibo tapestry Bahu had given me in Peru.

As I settled in and got comfortable, I felt the effects come on. One of the scary aspects of ayahuasca is that it can make you feel nervous at first. It feels like it’s coming on really fast and strong, and you don’t know how far it’s going to go. This was fairly mild and manageable, though. I felt some changes happening in my body and I started to feel high, but I wasn’t getting any visual effects. A couple of surges coursed through me, but I wasn’t breaking through a portal the way the shaman had described it. I was able to get up, walk around, and go out on the patio and have a cigarette. I noticed others were deep into it, making noises, sobbing, or lying down and meditating with their eyes closed, while I was up wandering around. I wondered if it was working or not.

{H1} Flying High

After two hours, the shaman called for anyone who wanted a second dose. Remembering what he had said about taking enough to cross over the portal, I drank another half glass and went back to my spot. Very quickly, the medicine took hold, and this time it was unmistakable. It simply surged in me. I felt myself climb that slope up into the infinite space of ayahuasca; it steepened and I ascended even more quickly. I had visions of my sisters and their smiling faces. They kept me grounded. I felt feminine energy all around me, embodied by breaths that were visible in the air.

Ayahuasca offers an overwhelming sensory experience, and it was magnified by the music that began around this time. Several musicians and the shaman were playing instruments and singing icaros—songs specifically used in ayahuasca ceremonies to channel energy or healing. I felt I was losing control as Bahu sang over me, chanting the word “ohm” and playing a long instrument that emitted a similar tone. The sound became color, and that frequency started shooting right through me. The vibrations emanated from him and traveled through my chest. At the same time, the shaman was shaking a leaf rattle—a chakapa—over me as well. I was inundated with sensation.

I had initially been worried about vomiting, but after the first dose I was feeling pretty confident that I had the nausea under control. There would be no purging for me tonight, I was sure. When the vibrations traveled through me and the colors swirled around me, though, the urge to vomit came on in a split second. I sat up fast, only to realize I had no motor skills, it was completely dark, and I had no idea where my purge bucket was. I couldn’t find the bucket for the life of me, but the first wave of vomit came on anyway. Then another. I was still determined not to let go until I found that bucket, but my sensory perception was so altered and my muscular capabilities so reduced, I just couldn’t do it. By the time the third wave hit, I just popped like a champagne bottle.

It went all over the floor, all over me, and it just kept coming. In ceremonial etiquette this is the worst thing that could happen. It’s awful for you, but it’s also horrifying for those next to you and the facilitators who have to clean it up, quickly, in the dark. A facilitator came over and shone an LED light around to find my bucket, stationed me over that, and got to work cleaning up. I could have stayed over that bucket for another half an hour, but she helped me stand up and escorted me to the washroom to clean up.

I was chagrined not only that I had vomited on the floor, but that there was so much of it. This was my own fault, no doubt, since I had ignored the fasting recommendations and had stopped at a gas station for beer and burritos on my way to the retreat. Now I was stuck in a washroom that only afforded a tiny trickle of water from the faucet, trying to clean myself up while a line grew outside because I was hogging the facilities. All the while, the walls twisted and morphed around me. I looked in the mirror and started laughing hysterically. I thought, “You dipshit. You wanted something intense. Here you go!”

{H1} Safe Landing

The facilitator helped me back to the ceremonial space, noting that I should avoid the Persian rug if I had to vomit again, but I assured her I was fine. Things took a more contemplative turn after this. I had some really wild visuals and did some grieving for my dog, Molly. I was still processing the trauma of losing such an important part of my upbringing. The ceremony allowed me the space and solitude to grieve about that and shed some tears. I felt I was finally able to say goodbye.

I had a lot of questions that I hoped to answer through this ceremony, and it helped tremendously. I went in wondering if I should take the fisheries job, and I got a clear answer that yes, it was an adventure I should embrace even if it would only be temporary. I also had a lot of regrets and guilt over mistakes I had made, failed relationships, and bad decisions in my past. I had a strong vision during this ceremony that erased all of that for me. It was like I was somebody else looking at me and seeing all the imperfections and injuries, yet feeling such a sense of love and forgiveness for this guy, which flipped a switch for me to move from sabotaging myself with self-destructive behavior to actually doing the things that could help me get ahead.

I could see that it had been so important for me that all of those things had happened along the way, because everything, no matter how wrong it seemed at the time, had led me to one beautiful, perfect point in time and space. Everything was a journey leading up to this point. I wasn’t making endless mistakes; I was following my own personal path. Knowing that allowed me to resolve lot of guilt and take responsibility for the future.

As the ceremony wound down, we were outside in the mountains, under a clear night sky with the moon and a few stars shining among the wispy clouds, and I looked up and realized I had just opened up a whole new dimension of life. I had a boundless appreciation for the great mysteries of the universe and all that I was yet to learn, but felt certain I was bound to learn.

The next day, we met with the shaman and the facilitators to share our experience. I said I felt like I had discovered the meaning of five words I thought I knew but didn’t understand until now. Those words were intensity, love, medicine, agony, and profundity. The experience was so transformative I wrote a highly descriptive email of the event and sent it to everyone in my contacts list. That really launched my path on ayahuasca. I knew I had to bring it to others.

{H1} Shimbre

My next step was to learn as much as I could about ayahuasca, the ceremonies, and how people could access it. I was following the Shimbre Shamanic Center’s website and learning about the founder’s life. Rob Velez was a Wall Street banker who suffered serious depression, stress, and anxiety from his high-finance life. He broke through that by working with shaman Jose Pineda Vargas, and was so moved by his experience that he started a healing center in the Amazon basin of Peru. Shimbre was hugely successful in 2010, when Rob was talking about it online and recruiting volunteers to come down and serve as chefs, artists, and writers.

I jumped on the resident writer position, because it would put me on-site, where I would write about the experience. I sent Rob a couple of writing samples and told him about my own ayahuasca experience. When I got the okay from Rob, I took the month of February, 2011 off from my fisheries work to travel back down to Peru. Once there, I started a blog that began with the story of my first ayahuasca experience in the Amazon jungle and segued into recording the workings of the Shimbre center.

A couple of things came out of my time at Shimbre. I gained insight into the operations of such a center, and I also did a lot of very deep personal exploration and introspection. Challenges came at me from every direction. Living in the jungle, fasting, learning from the people who worked there, studying the shaman’s medicines—it was a lot to take in. I purged in every ceremony, which served to cleanse my physical body and my energetic body as well. My thinking became clearer and my emotional state was more stable.

The medicine has proven scientific effects on mood over the long term, raising the “happy chemicals,” serotonin and dopamine. Ayahuasca isn’t like MDMA or cocaine, where the mood-lifting chemicals surge while you are using the drug, but leave you with a deficit of those same chemicals afterwards.

In the moment, ayahuasca may actually ask more of you. You do feel a state of bliss and tranquility while you’re on the medicine, as long as you’re not writhing in discomfort. After the main effects subside, though, you achieve an overall sense of well-being that can last for days or weeks, depending on how well you treat your body after the experience.

A 2004 study by Dennis McKenna (“Clinical Investigations of the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca: rationale and regulatory challenges.” *Pharmacology & Therapeutics,* 102, 111-129.) looked into ayahuasca’s effects on regular users, such as the members of União do Vegetal, a religious group in Brazil. They discovered a lot of interesting trends, such as lower levels of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and criminal activity alongside higher levels of serotonin. Regular use of ayahuasca can bring those levels up for the long term.

I felt those beneficial psychological effects in myself, in terms of a greater sense of well-being, and a tempering of my ego. I found myself becoming more independent in my thought processes and less dependent on the approval of others. It was a time of mental growth.

The physical effects were remarkable too. I was able to quit smoking, improve my diet, and dramatically reduce my alcohol consumption.

As my mind cleared, I began brainstorming for the first time what would become Pulse Tours and Ayahuasca Adventure Center. I wasn’t interested in replicating Shimbre, where the focus was on the shamans and their traditions. I wanted a place in the jungle, but I wanted it to be a little more lighthearted and fun. This was the first time in my life I had been able to rein in all of my scattered passions and skills and focus them on one ideal outcome. In the past, I had not been able to wholeheartedly look beyond a six-month to one-year timeframe. I could never fully define what I wanted to do with my life. My newfound certainty super-charged me with the energy I needed.

Up until this point, I felt like I was a jack of all trades, but master of none. I had technical experience, tourism experience, and sales experience, but where was it all leading? As the concept of building a retreat center in the jungle grew in my mind, I realized I could mix these things together with other skills like language learning and teaching. The new center could be an intercultural integration center with educational programs for foreigners to come and learn language and culture.

I was really psyched to start a center, but I was focused on Brazil, and probably a little over-optimistic because of how much I had enjoyed living there. My idea was to have both English and Portuguese language learners in the same place, mixing together and interacting. We would host ceremonies from time to time, but it wouldn’t be a full-on shamanic center. Participants would be encouraged to go out and do fun things together outside the center as well.

My notebook quickly filled up with blog posts, site drawings, and business plans. I had my eye on Manaus, with a population of almost two million people. Tourism and teaching English were both big there. I felt confident I could bring ayahuasca into the mix in a meaningful way.

{H1} Reading Up

Before I could set up shop in Manaus, however, I was due back in Canada. It seemed like a step back, but returning home led me to some interesting discoveries. I started working on the ocean again, in a little town called Port Hardy. Commercial fishermen made money hand over fist there in the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when there were no regulations and the fish stocks were more plentiful. By the time I got up there, though, the economy had gone bust. The fishing industry had been dramatically downsized. Fishermen were required to stick to a quota system, plus they had to pay for the observers. So Port Hardy was a little run down.

It seems like the least likely place for me to pick up cutting-edge entrepreneurial advice, but that’s what happened. Sitting in a café and bookstore, awaiting my next trip out, I noticed Tim Ferriss’s book, *The 4-Hour Workweek*, on the shelf. It caught my attention right away. The tagline was: “Escape the 9 to 5, live anywhere, and join the new rich.” I was hooked.

I took that book on the boat with me, and I must have read it ten times. The sheer number of hours I spent sitting in the stateroom while the fishermen were working was usually overwhelming; now I could use it to read, highlight, take notes, and add tabs to half the pages in this book. Ferriss’s words validated thoughts I had entertained for years. I always felt a bit of the maverick for my critical take on how people were supposed to think and behave in Western culture, and here was a guy with the same thoughts, plus a bunch of tools for escaping the system.

I grabbed Scott Belsky’s book *Making Ideas Happen* from that same bookstore and devoured it as well. These books came into my life at an important time. They inspired me to go beyond brainstorming to investigating online forums and website platforms like Weebly and WordPress where I could actually make my ideas public.

By June, I felt I had learned all I could at the fisheries job. Brazil was calling, loud and clear, and I heeded her call.

Back in Manaus, I started putting into practice everything I had learned from Ferriss and Belsky. My objective was to locate property, develop my business plan, and make it happen. I used Belsky’s action method religiously, writing down my daily action steps, assigning each of those to my current projects, and organizing my life essentially into a series of projects. Some things moved to the back burner occasionally, but overall, I was making progress.

Network engagement was next on my list. I started a Manaus blog, which I sent out to all my contacts every Sunday. Here I illuminated my objectives, made updates, posted travel photos and information, and just generally mused about the project. I didn’t have a big audience; most readers knew me personally, but it still helped keep me on point.

Day-to-day life did its best to keep me from swift headway, however. The visa situation alone was enough to make me crazy. When I applied for a visa and got it, I didn’t even think to check it. I just assumed it was a five-year visa with six months available each year. As was crossing the border, though, the immigration attendant asked me how long I was staying. In my mind, I was thinking, “forever” but I told him, “Oh, I don’t know. Two or three months?” He said, “I’m sorry sir, your visa is only good for thirty days.” Thirty days? Sure enough, when I looked at it I could clearly see it was a thirty-day, single entry visa.

Still, I was there, so I dug into my English teaching job, only to discover it wasn’t as lucrative as I thought it would be. I only got about twenty hours a week of work, and some weeks that meant forty hours of bus rides getting from place to place.

Scouting for a retreat site didn’t go much better. I found some half decent properties in the area, but most were more expensive than I had expected. My very optimistic hope was to get investments from friends and family to fund a time-share scenario, with rooms or bungalows we could rent out. Unfortunately, my timing was off, as jungle tourism in Manaus was declining. G Adventures had even stopped doing the trip I had led.

Brazil did not turn out to be the right place for a center, but I was able to take away many valuable lessons. Business lessons, to be sure, but I also had time to absorb more teachings on ayahuasca and refine my vision of what my ayahuasca center might or might not include.

{H1} Santo Daime

I was thinking about doing jungle tours, and taking people out to do ayahuasca, to experience it in a jungle setting. I set out to get to know the Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal groups, two Brazilian religions that use ayahuasca in their ceremonies. A student connected me to the Santo Daime group first, and they invited me to one of their ceremonial centers a couple hours outside Manaus. It was a beautiful property, nestled in the jungle, bordering a lake. Probably sixty or eighty people had gathered for the ceremony, ranging from teenagers to elders.

It seemed promising, but the ceremony itself was nothing like I expected. I have never been overly receptive to religion, and this ceremony came across as an intense religious service. It actually felt cultish to me.

The Santo Daime have created a merger between Christianity and ayahuasca, which they call “Daime.” They use the medicine as a sacrament to connect them to God. During the ceremony, the participants wear all-white costumes and the women stand separately from the men. Everyone gets a special hymn book, and they sing and dance together while on the medicine, to generate an energy or a connection to God.

They gave me a book, and I had to pretend I was singing, or at least look at the book and try to sing along. Everybody was doing a sort of two-step dance at the same time. It was worlds apart from my previous experiences, drinking ayahuasca in a dark setting, going quietly into myself in my own space. It felt really strange. Here, people were dancing all around with crazy looks in their eyes, and vomiting everywhere. They would go outside and vomit in broad view before going back in and dancing and singing some more.

As the only English-speaking, white guy there, I felt out of place. It was culture shock of a sort. Any time I sat down to regroup, one of the organizers would grab me and push me to sing and dance. Even when I tried to find a secluded spot to purge, people kept coming to get me and dragging me back into the strange phenomenon unfolding inside the ceremonial space. Everyone was extremely welcoming, but the overall scene was not my cup of tea.

During the ceremony, I was hoping my friend Lawrence would show up. I met him at the hostel earlier in the year—he worked there—and he had told me he was thinking of trying ayahuasca, to address some problems in his life. We talked a lot. He told me he felt like he was participating in a lot of self-destructive behaviors, like drinking and getting into fights, even playing in traffic. He confessed he felt like a demon was controlling his life and putting him in danger. He was afraid he might kill himself, and he wanted to spare his one-year-old son that pain.

He was originally going to drive me to the Santo Daime ceremony and stay with me. As of Tuesday that week, we were planning it out, but by Thursday, I couldn’t get hold of him. It was the same on Friday, and the ceremony was set for Saturday. I assumed that he had gotten nervous about going, but I never heard a word.

By the time I returned on Saturday, I still hadn’t heard from him and I started mentally berating him. I thought, “This guy, what a jerk to ditch me like that.” The next day, though, I learned the truth. Lawrence had died in a car crash on the Avenida de Tourismo on Wednesday night. Alcohol was probably a factor. They had a funeral and buried him the next day, closed casket.

Lawrence’s death had a huge impact on me. I had just been talking to him a few days before, listening to him tell me how much he wanted to live. And now, he was gone. His death spurred me to completely quit drinking alcohol. For the rest of my stay I Brazil, I didn’t touch a drop.

It was surprisingly easy to stop. I came from a culture where alcohol is essentially the only recreational activity available. In rural Canada, people drink at work, they drink after work, and they get really drunk on the weekend. I had been drinking regularly for a decade or more and I got plastered just about every weekend. I was nervous about weekends without drinking. I hadn’t socialized without a drink in my hand since high school. Could I really just stop?

{H1} União do Vegetal

After the Santo Daime ceremony, I started doing ceremonies with another group, the União do Vegetal, or UDV. Somehow, I was able to hang out with these folks without drinking. When I finished a weekend there, I would feel really good, not sick and hungover.

UDV ceremonies felt better to me than the Santo Daime rituals. Though the religious aspect remained, the UDV didn’t focus so much on Christianity as spirituality. They talked about God, but nobody handed me a hymn book or wove Bible stories into their discourse like the Santo Daime did.

The group was building a big, new ceremonial structure, so they would get together to work on it, then have a meal, with the kids all running around playing before the ceremony started. During the ceremony, elders sat at a central table, and they would drink first. Then they invited everyone else to get their cup of “Vegetal,” which is what the UDV called their sacrament.

I sat in a comfortable chair in a well-lit space. Music and song filled the room, but it was gentle and contemplative. I never felt forced to join in the singing. I felt much more at home in this place and with these people. Everyone was helpful, offering rides home after the ceremony, even at four or five o’clock in the morning. I made some good friends there, and went back to see them in 2014 when I organized the Brazil World Cup Ayahuasca adventure.

I didn’t necessarily recognize that I was filing away ideas for my own future from these ceremonies, but the way ayahuasca practice works, you stop looking at it like individual ceremonies. The practice becomes an ongoing process rather than a series of encounters. Often, the first ceremony feels like a huge event, because you make rapid progress. As time goes on, each occasion functions more like a check-in, giving you a chance to reset yourself.

I managed to extend my visa, so I spent a couple of months in Manaus before returning to Canada for a friend’s wedding, and to see about working for my dad again. He was on board with Tim Ferriss’s ideas about remote work, so I didn’t have to actually be sitting in the small town of Walkerton. I could travel and work, attend meetings, and follow up on sales calls from the road.

Meanwhile, education was high on my agenda. I hated not having any qualifications. I kept going back to sales, because I hit roadblocks everywhere else, and I needed to open up some other options.

My dad supported me in pursuing higher education, which was helpful. In April of 2012, he found Royal Roads University, which offered a flexible admissions process that allowed me to use life experience to gain acceptance. It was the perfect place for someone like me.

[BEGIN TEXT BOX]

{H1} Stories of Personal Transformation: Guy Crittenden

An environmental journalist and writer, Guy Crittenden talks about what makes ayahuasca so transformative, and how his experiences at Pulse Tours Ayahuasca Adventure Center have helped him on his journey. Look for more from Guy on Blogspot, his writings on the Pulse Tours website, and in his forthcoming book, *The Year of Drinking Magic: 12 Ceremonies with the Vine of Souls*.

“I only ever consciously thought of myself as being on a spiritual path, probably within the past seven or eight years. I suppose you could say it went back ten years to when I separated from my wife at the time. I went through a period when I was very rudderless. I was working as an editor and writer for a couple of environmental magazines that at one time, I'd owned with a couple of partners and we sold to a conglomerate. My career was the only thing that was stable in my life after I got divorced. I spent a couple of years in and out of relationships, exploring the nightlife of Toronto, doing all the wild and crazy things that I couldn't do when I was married. It was very hedonistic and I wouldn't say it would qualify as spiritual in most people's books. There is an element of any spiritual journey where one explores one's shadow. I now view that rudderless period as a period of exploring my shadow self. I was doing shadow work, although I wouldn't have had the vocabulary then to call it that.

“Then I was listening to the radio one day and I heard an interview on Canadian Public Radio on a program that focuses on spirituality, where the host was interviewing a fellow by the name of Brad Warner, who is a punk rock bass player and also an ordained Soto school Zen monk. He was talking about a book that he'd written about meditation with the memorable name *Sit Down and Shut Up*, which despite its catchy name is actually an explication of the work of 13th century Zen monk Dogen, who is to Zen Buddhism what Shakespeare is to English literature. That put me into a path of several years of studying Buddhism and starting a meditation practice and through that, I was led to the insight that I only got at that time on an intellectual level, not an experiential level, that what we are, each of us, are local manifestations of a universal non-local consciousness. Or as Ram Dass puts it rather humorously, we are all God in drag. God in disguise. God hiding from himself, pretending he's not himself, which is a foundational idea of Hinduism and Buddhism.

“I was on that path when I came across a little video that showed people on a trip in the Amazon. I liked two aspects of what was being offered by this little travel company called Pulse Tours. One aspect was that I could go to the Amazon, which is to environmentalists what the Vatican is to Catholics, so I could genuflect to my espoused interest in the environment but I could also go and drink ayahuasca three times at a shamanic retreat center. I called Dan Cleland. It was hard to get a hold of anyone at Pulse because Dan and Tatyana were away leading a tour. Eventually, I heard back from them and I arranged to join their ten-day trip over New Year's Eve of 2013-2014. That's how it all came to be.

“My experience with psychedelics was at that time limited to just one experience that I had when I was in my twenties. I'd been on a hiking trip with a couple of guys in the Adirondack Mountains and one of them, who's a cousin of mine, had brought along some LSD in blotter form. I had an experience with that that made a great impression on me. In fact, given how beautiful and profound that experience was, it's amazing to me that I didn't do it again. In that experience, I'd developed a god-like or superpower of hearing and I could hear every bird and plant and insect for miles. Not only could I hear them all, but I could track what each one was up to individually rather than as a big cacophony. That changed my perception of reality because I realized at that moment that our normal state of consciousness is highly filtered and that what a lot of our brain is doing is not so much bringing in information as it is filtering it out so that as the hunter-gatherers that we evolved from, we could concentrate on a much narrower band of experience that allowed us to be successful hunters and allowed us to hunt food and not become food.

“Then I fell back into my life and I got busy with my career and getting married and starting a family and all that. It was only when my marriage ended and my children were older that I got back onto this thing that I call my past. Because of the LSD experience, I had this kind of dormant interest in psychedelics but our culture always presents these things as drugs and it always presents them as taboos. Unless you're moving in certain crowds, which I was not moving in for a long time, they're not easy to come by. One of the problems with LSD for a very long time, and I know this from people who were moving in the right crowds, is it's not easy to come by good LSD. I would have had to go way out of my way to find it at a time when I was busy with other things.

“That all changed when the movement got underway. I think it is a movement, which we could call the psychedelic movement, or the new psychedelic movement, which is like the psychedelic movement of the counterculture of the 1960s and '70s. Except unlike that, it's based in the shamanic or the teacher plants or the master plants. Once I started looking into that further, I realize it would not be difficult to have an experience in a really good context. With psychedelics, set and setting are important. With ayahuasca in the better centers, everything is set up in your favor to experience it in a safe container, so to speak.

“So, I finally bought my ticket and I took my turn. I was not sure what to expect at that time and it's funny to think it was only three or four years ago. There was not the robust amount of information and personal accounts available that there are today. I remember browsing the internet and reading everything I could to try and get a handle on what my experience might be. People would talk about seeing geometry and colors but it seems that there were not a lot of good writers at that time. I didn't really know what to expect but the first night we drank . . . Well, it takes about thirty or forty minutes for the medicine to come on and for the DMT to cross into the blood-brain barrier. Within only a few minutes of that happening, this reality was completely switched out for another reality.

“I know that some of the other people on the trip didn't have much in the way of visions or teachings. A lot of them had more of a feeling of the medicine cleaning them out in terms of their digestion and stuff. My experience was, I was dropped right into the deep end of the swimming pool and had an extremely profound visionary experience or sequence of visionary experiences that are pretty much as good as it could get. I'm very sensitive to these medicines and I respond very powerfully to them. That's for reasons we'll get into in a minute. That's not an accident. I found almost right away that I was experiencing an alternate dimension of reality that was as people like Terrence McKenna describe it, it was extraordinary in its accuracy, its detail, its clarity.

“One of the things I'd wondered before I did it was, was it going to feel like a dream and was I going to be put in a temporarily psychotic state in which I would mistake my dreams for reality. The DMT chemical is the same chemical that is implicated in our dreaming and in the visions of near-death experiences or NDEs. What I found was that that other dimension was more real than real. I was shocked at the precision of the visions. The visions looked like they were made from etched glass or with the detail of a Fabergé egg. Everything was crusted with jewels, luminescent. Everything moving. I just went on a wild carpet ride, a magic carpet ride to many, many experiences in that one first night. Many hundreds of teachings, some of them more memorable than others. My entire sense of reality was permanently changed on that first night. Then the other two nights that I drank ayahuasca down there just further confirmed that. My entire world changed on that trip.

“Subsequently, I have drunk ayahuasca about fifteen times. I have begun to explore other plant medicines like San Pedro cactus, which is also known as huachuma, and certain other, more subtle plants. I've also started to use psilocybin mushrooms. Always, I might add, in a reverential and ceremonial type of context. I don't use them as a recreational or party drug, so to speak. I'm always amazed when people tell me that they went to a party and they took mushrooms and they had all kinds of shits and giggles because I can't do that. The way that I resonate with those teacher plants is I am, even at a low dose, I am immediately transported into that other dimension. It usually starts with a lot of lessons in humility and if there's anything less than reverential in my attitude, I have my ass handed to me.

“Now I feel that I have been called to a shamanic path myself and I'm in the process of figuring out what that means in the context of living in a modern technocratic society. I know some people go to South America and they drink ayahuasca or they experience huachuma or one of these plants and they do it two or three times and then they come back to their life in North America and they just go back to their life. They say, well, that was my experience. They might have got some benefit out of it. They might feel like they got the equivalent of a couple of years of psychiatry in one night. It might help them resolve questions they have about a career path or a relationship they're in and things like that.

“Some other people respond to these experiences so powerfully that they actually go back to South America or they stay there and they serve an apprenticeship with a shaman. They either move permanently to South America or they're there for six months or a year and then they bring those skills back to whatever their home country is, in North America or Europe. My path seems to be a bit different than that. I seem to be called to establish a beachhead, like an early invasion force of the invasion of Normandy in WWII, to establish or revive Celtic shamanism in North America. There's something that is calling me and I've been resisting it, but it keeps calling me back and it keeps bringing me back in.

“Curiously, I went to South America expecting to drink ayahuasca, which I guess was all about just experiencing that plant. Yet surprisingly, it has changed my life and I now find myself on a very unexpected path that has a lot less to do with ayahuasca and a lot more to do with shamanism. In other words, that plant is just one of several plants that are part of the shamanic toolbox. For me, it's not about ayahuasca anymore. It's about shamanism and that can involve plants and sometimes not involve plants.

“I don't know what my shamanic path will look like yet. Last year, I quit my job of twenty-five years. I was ready to move on. I would have left the job in a few years anyway but my experience with Pulse Tours inspired me to move that date forward on my calendar and get on with it.

“I'd been a magazine editor and writer for twenty-five years. My partners and I started a publication on pollution control in 1989 and a couple of years later, we had started a magazine on waste management and recycling. I was ready to move on, so now I do freelance writing. My themes are still environmental protection but also now I write about spirituality and shamanism. What I'm especially interested in is where those things intersect. In other words, there are some writers who write about shamanism or spirituality and there are some writers who write about environmental protection but there are not a lot of writers who are bringing all of that together.

“The solution to our environmental challenges requires a consciousness shift. Otherwise, if all we're doing is worrying about what kind of plastic bottle we can throw in our recycling bin, it's like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. The level of transformation that has to take place in society for us to turn the juggernaut around, to continue that metaphor, is significant and it's not going to be supplied by the ego, mind, and the male-dominated culture that we've been trapped in for hundreds of years, especially since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution.

“I actually have come to believe that shamanism and the teacher plants are integral to the changes that are happening and the consciousness shift that's already underway. Essentially, our culture is being assaulted, and I use that term positively, from an angle that it was completely unprepared for, and that is the male dominator, imperialistic, colonial culture that we're still in. We’re being broadsided by these master plants and shamanic traditions that channel a very feminine energy and connect us directly to what we could call the Gaian mind. That's where I'm at now and that's what I'm working at trying to understand and trying to promote through my work and my writing. Yeah, I got a lot out of my Pulse Tours experience.”

“Dan and Pulse Tours are doing some very interesting work with their ayahuasca adventure center. What he's building there is very much a fusion of some different styles of personal transformation. I think he's carved out an interesting niche where he's properly understood that what we experienced with the ayahuasca medicine is a revival of what had been a dying or fading indigenous custom. Back when Terrence McKenna and the other hippies of the '70s and '60s were going to South America, it was very difficult to find ayahuasca. It was very difficult to find a shaman who knew where to and how to prepare the medicine. This was a tradition that was in steep decline.

“People sometimes are very critical of how it's being exploited now and there's some foundation for that. The tourism around spiritual and therapeutic use of this medicine is actually what has revived it and it's now going out into the broader culture. What is needed or one of several things that is needed is opportunities for people to use that or harness the power of ayahuasca to slingshot themselves into a more rapid and powerful personal transformations. When we go to the center, people can do all kinds of exercise and they can do martial arts training and all this kind of stuff, and also have trips out into the jungle and trying to reflect about what they're doing. There are different styles of other types of centers that are needed too but Dan is filling a really good niche.

“What I have been shown on the medicine . . . I don't even know if Dan realizes this yet. I did tell him one time, and I do think it's going to happen, is that not only will he be part of bringing spiritual seekers to South America to heal themselves, but I think he's going to be involved in the next level, which is to start training shamans. I think his ayahuasca retreat center could eventually become like a Shaolin Temple where people come and get specific training and then they would be sent back to North America to extend teachings of the plants into the technocratic societies that are that are actually pulling down the Amazon and every major ecosystem in the world. It's like the plant, the spirit of the jungle is spreading her vines around the world herself and she's using that other network of the internet to do that.”

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