

Therapist *Fiona Goodwin* travelled deep into the Peruvian jungle in the hope that the plant medicine *ayahuasca* would unlock a lifetime of repressed grief

Illustration by Andrea Mongia

Healing with plant medicine

Doubled up in discomfort on a foam mattress, my head hanging over a plastic bucket, I'm praying for the nausea to subside. It's night-time and I am in a large, thatched hut in Peru with a group of other *passajeros*, or 'travellers' as the shamans call us. We have all just ingested a small cup of *ayahuasca*, a plant medicine aptly nicknamed 'La Purga'. I downed in one gulp the bitter, brown, syrupy brew and am now waiting the 20 minutes or so for it to take effect. This is my first ceremony.

When, from the comfort of my leafy Warwickshire home, I did a Google-search and found this 12-day *ayahuasca* retreat, I chose to dismiss all reference to the purgative nature of the medicine. My main focus of anxiety had been the possibility of catching malaria, dengue fever or typhoid and how I would respond to the hallucinogenic nature of the medicine.

My decision to take *ayahuasca* had been intuitive – I had heard it mentioned when I lived in California but knew no one who had taken it. I had never experimented with hallucinogenics, recreationally or otherwise. But further research confirmed my belief that *ayahuasca* might offer significant therapeutic benefit. My other hoped-for outcome would be to gain greater understanding of clients who were recreational drug users.

Personally, I was at a crossroads. I had taken time off work to care for my ailing mother. Our new closeness and

her subsequent death had opened a door to repressed grief. My therapist supported my inclination to take this step.

The way of light

The journey to the Temple of the Way of Light had been daunting: a 12-hour flight to Lima, another two-hour flight into the rainforest, to Iquitos (the largest town in the world that is accessible only by boat or plane), followed by a 45-minute rickety bus ride to the river, where we clambered aboard a couple of straw-canopied long boats.

The other participants seemed surprisingly conventional. They included a German doctor, a South African business owner, a Canadian construction worker, a homeopath from the Bronx, a Newcastle train driver and a translator from the UN. We were 21 in total.

We motored up the Amazon for about an hour until we reached an opening in the rainforest where the waterways narrowed and diverged. Cell phone reception was lost and replaced by a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach: would I ever be able to find my way back home on my own?

Our boatmen did not speak Spanish – they were from the indigenous Shipibo tribe. When our boat reached shore we were met by more Shipibos, who carried our bags as we tramped another 40 minutes in 90-degree heat through swamps and swarms of mosquitos. I was dressed for protection from the stinging, biting insects. Wellington boots had been



recommended. Indeed, the kit list with which we were supplied had been extensive and I had exchanged numerous emails with the organisers about inoculations, mosquito repellents and the two-week preparatory diet that excluded sugar, alcohol, dairy, pork, salt and sex. Their genuine knowledge and the care that I experienced in these interactions had done a great deal to allay my fears.

And now here I was on my mattress, waiting to vomit and hallucinate. The lanterns had been extinguished and the screeching and cawing sounds of the jungle reminded me of just how far I was from Warwickshire. The anticipation was nerve-wracking. Then my face started to tingle and go numb and my stomach began to churn; it was nine o'clock and we had not eaten since lunchtime. The German doctor on the mat next to me started to heave into his bucket.

Fear and nausea

Prior to this first ceremony, I had my individual consultation with the six shamans and the facilitator. There were four female shamans wearing traditional tribal garb – brightly coloured skirts and tops – and two men in cotton shirts and trousers. They came from surrounding villages, some up to 24 hours away by boat. Some looked quite ancient. All had been apprenticed and had trained for years to perform the service they would provide for us.

The Shipibos have been using *ayahuasca* for thousands of years; the lineage is unbroken despite the efforts of the Conquistadores and the missionaries to destroy it. It was also threatened recently by the UN's imposition of a western-style education curriculum that did not include cultural traditions.

My intentions in coming to the Temple were translated into Spanish, then into Shipibo. I told them the story of my father's departure when I was five, the simultaneous changing of my name by her embittered mother, followed by her cutting off my long hair and taking me into her bed for her comfort at night. My father was not spoken of again. He was simply 'disappeared'.

The shamans nodded wisely and conferred. Their conclusions came back to the facilitator via the translator: '*Su corazón es cerrado*' – 'Her heart is closed, *ayahuasca* will open her heart.' Such a simple diagnosis. The whole process took just 15 minutes. Their impassive, wizened faces broke into warm smiles. The facilitator translated, saying that they liked easy cases. I raised

my eyebrows. They nodded and laughed at my incredulity. Their confidence was infectious.

Back on my mattress, the medicine was finally taking effect. A flood of random images – wicker blinds, a golden light behind them that I longed for but could not reach, clocks and bells and whirring sounds. The nausea was building. I was in great physical and mental discomfort. There was a stream of indescribable shapes and noises. Then I noticed the staring – men in black goggles staring at me – Nazis.

I sensed the weight of the atrocities they had committed. I was terrified but there was no escaping their penetrating, malevolent glare. What were they going to do to me? By this time I could hardly move, my body was heavy and sluggish, there was no escaping them. The terror was unrelenting; I was too scared to flash my torch for assistance from the facilitators. The shamans then in unison started a weird, meandering wailing. There was nothing fun about this; I wanted to go home. My mind was arguing: 'I thought this was supposed to open my heart... this is wrong... it's not what I'm here for... it's not working...'

Then there was a shaman sitting in front of me. It was too dark to see her but she started singing to me. I didn't feel comforted though, and my heart was still not 'opening'. The nausea built up more strongly until I had to quickly reach for my bucket and throw up. She carried on singing. I felt some relief but continued to be sick past the moment that my stomach was empty, retching with nothing left to bring up.

At last the Nazis faded away, along with the terror. I felt weak and lonely. I had no sense of how much time was passing. I finally dozed off and slept deeply in the hut with everyone else till around 6am, when I stumbled back to my sleeping hut and slept again.

A little later that morning, bleary-eyed and touselled, we lined up at the shaman's hut for our daily remedies. Fortunately in my case that included massage. Breakfast followed – delicious jungle fruits and vegetables. We compared notes. Everyone had had such different experiences. A 30-year-old Spanish woman who had been chronically depressed for five years was now even more depressed. The Canadian construction worker was agitated and fitful. The Newcastle train driver was in complete bliss.

I gabbed on about the Nazis and people gave me their opinions about what it meant. Then I blurted: 'They

were looking at me just the way my mother used to – it was so terrifying, just like she was!' My eyes filled with tears, it was making sense. My new companions nodded in recognition. I realised that the hallucination was an incredibly accurate representation of the fear and desolation of my childhood.

Opening my heart

This process continued throughout the 12-day 'treatment'. Whenever the shaman sat in front of me and sang my stomach would immediately start to churn, the nausea would increase and precipitate the purging, resulting in physical and psychological relief each time. When I asked one shaman what they saw when they were singing, she told me that in the dark they could see the medicine working, travelling through the body; the blockages appeared as dark patches. After they sang and we purged, she said, the dark patches became light.

There followed more nights of random images, mostly incomprehensible, painful and disturbing. I argued with the experience, telling myself that I was no good at *ayahuasca* – that other people were better at it. Annoyingly, the Russian interior designer seemed just to get happier and happier, with no sign of any disturbance. A New Zealand doctor told me that it was easier for people who, like her, had experience of using magic mushrooms and LSD.

By the third ceremony I was fascinated but also tiring of trying to make sense of the Sergeant Pepper-like images: the complex yellow structures, wormholes and tunnels I was navigating around and through. It all felt meaningless. I found myself wondering again: 'How is this helping me to open my heart?' I realised afterwards that what I was seeing was once again a perfect representation of how I felt in my childhood: detached, cold and abandoned in a strange and senseless world.

A shaman came over at that moment and sang, the nonsensical images intensified, and I vomited. It was a relief; the weird images faded. Another shaman came and this time sang so lovingly that I softened. Then I saw him – my father.

He was standing at the end of a hallway in our house. I was five or six, wide-eyed and curious as to what he was doing. He was about 26, wearing grey slacks and a grey wool sweater. He was looking back at me. He was holding open the front door and from behind him a bright light was pouring into the passageway. He picked me up and I felt the familiar sensation of his wool sweater, rough

against my cheek. He explained that he was leaving, that he didn't want to go but he couldn't stay. I was engulfed in grief, his grief for the loss of his children, his love for me and for my brother.

Then the scene shifted: I was even younger, in my cot, hearing shouting. In my heart I implored, 'Please be nice to each other, please be friends, this is my family, my home and it's all coming apart.' The crying turned to deep sobs.

A shaman came and sang and took my hands. She poured water onto them, rubbed them and blew into them and onto my face and head. She was so loving. More time passed. Hernando, the oldest of the shamans, sat in front of me and sang, but it wasn't his voice, it was my father's. My voice in response was that of a small girl: 'There are lots of things that I want to do with you, Daddy, things I want to tell you.' I was again engulfed in the loss, his and mine. His love for me in that moment was more than I had ever felt from anyone.

I lay down on the mattress and became that weeping five year old. I was waiting for my father, wondering when he was coming to read me my story, to stroke my head, to let me comb his hair in the dark so I could see the sparks from the static. He never came - why didn't he come? Where had he gone? The bewilderment of his disappearance washed over me. The grieving would die down but, when I thought there could be no more, it would start all over again. At times it was too deep to even make a sound - my body was gripped, the tears pouring silently down my cheeks. I have never in my own therapy or with a client experienced such deep catharsis and empathy.

Therapeutic benefits

I left a huge weight of grief behind in Peru. In its place I feel a new optimism and lightness. All of my fellow travellers, without exception, reported having been similarly affected by the *ayahuasca* experience.

Two months later, I am in a new conversation with my 80-year old father. He was visibly moved by the accuracy with which I remembered his experience of 'abandoning' me - under duress. I have softened and am more compassionate toward him and warmer and more at ease around other father figures because of the realisation that my father had always cared deeply for me.

On my return to the UK I wanted to know what research was being conducted into the therapeutic benefits of *ayahuasca* use. I learned that such research has

been hampered until recently because the substance was illegal in the West. However a considerable body of academic research is being amassed, mainly conducted in institutions in North and South America but also in Europe, as well as the development of good practice and moves towards regulation of the treatment. This was evidenced by the presentations and workshops at the 2014 World *Ayahuasca* Conference, held in Ibiza last year.¹

To pick just one important study, in 1993 Charles Grob, now Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics at the UCLA School of Medicine, conducted a study of the effects of *ayahuasca* on a group of 15 long-term users.² All the study subjects had histories of drug, alcohol and other substance use and/or anxiety and depression; all reported that their physical and mental health improved after they started using *ayahuasca* regularly, that their addictions and mental health problem remitted and that their work, family and social relationships also improved. The research team also found evidence to suggest that one of the ingredients of *ayahuasca*, tetrahydrocannabinol, has a similar effect to SSRIs in that it maximises the efficiency of the brain's use of the neurotransmitter serotonin.

My own experience demonstrated to me the value of this healing plant, but also the need for expert supervision while under its influence. My hope is that it will one day be considered an acceptable additional tool to the therapeutic process in the West. ■

You can find videos of documentary filmmaker and indigenous rights activist Bruce Parry's 12-day retreat at the Temple of the Way of Light at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wM_Hvvcw2KE

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