

Excerpts from
THE ULTIMATE JOURNEY: CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE MYSTERY OF DEATH
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SHAMANISM: THE ARCHAIC TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY

The witch doctor succeeds for the same reason the rest of us (doctors) succeed. Each patient carries his own doctor inside him. They come to us not knowing this truth. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to go to work.

– Albert Schweitzer, German physician, theologian, philosopher, and musician

EXPERIENTIAL TRAINING FOR DYING can be traced back tens of thousands of years, to the dawn of humanity and the practice of shamanism, an ancient art of healing and the first form of spiritual practice for which we have archaeological records. The term “shaman” is most likely derived from the Tunguso-Manchurian word saman, meaning literally “he or she who knows.” This name reflects the deep respect for the profound knowledge of the psyche and of the nature of reality that shamans possess. In its narrower and more specialized anthropological sense, this term refers to Siberian native healers and their use of ceremonial costume, the one-sided drum, trance state, and visionary journeys. In its broader sense, it has been widely used for a variety of native healers in different parts of the world, who have also been popularly known as medicine men, witch doctors, sorcerers, or wizards.

A unique feature of shamans, when compared to other healers, is their use of holotropic states of consciousness for healing themselves and others and for a variety of other purposes. Shamans have the reputation of being able to diagnose, heal, and cause diseases, communicate with the worlds beyond, and use extrasensory perception to foretell the future. Among other feats they reportedly see things happening in remote places, locate lost people and objects, influence weather, and monitor the movement of game animals. They are viewed as guardians of the psychic and ecological equilibrium of their people, intermediaries between the seen and unseen, masters of spirits, and supernatural healers.

Shamanism is extremely ancient, probably at least thirty to forty thousand years old; its deepest roots can be traced far back to the Paleolithic era. The walls of the famous caves in Southern France and northern Spain, such as Lascaux, Font de Gaume, Les Trois Frères, La Gabillou, Altamira, and others are decorated with beautiful images of animals and mythical

creatures with striking magical and ritual significance. Paintings and carvings of strange figures in many of these caves combine human and animal features and undoubtedly represent ancient shamans. Among the most famous are the “Sorcerer” from Les Trois Frères, the “Dancer” from La Gabillou, and the “Beast Master” from Lascaux. Also well known is the hunting scene on the wall in the Lascaux cave complex, which shows a wounded bison and a lying figure of a shaman with an erect penis. The origins of shamanism can be traced back to a yet older Neanderthal cult of the cave bear and its animal shrines from the interglacial period found in the grottoes in Switzerland and southern Germany.

Shamanism is not only ancient, but also universal; it can be found in North and South America, in Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The fact that shamanism has pervaded so many different cultures throughout human history suggests that the holotropic states that the shamans induce engage what the anthropologists call the “primal mind”—a basic and primordial aspect of the human psyche that transcends race, sex, culture, and historical time. Shamanic techniques and procedures have survived until this very day in cultures that have escaped the deleterious influence of Western industrial civilization.

Initiatory Experiences

Shamanism is closely related to death and dying. The career of many shamans begins with a spontaneous visionary state. This initiatory crisis, or “shamanic illness,” as Western anthropologists call it, usually takes the form of a profound experience of psychospiritual death and rebirth and represents extraordinary experiential training for actual death. The initiatory crisis is not always spontaneous. Practicing shamans sometimes initiate their apprentices into the shamanic profession by inducing similar experiences with the use of powerful mind-altering procedures, such as psychedelic plants or a combination of drumming, rattling, chanting, dancing, fasting, and sleep deprivation. They also use these methods in their own journeying and when they are helping others.

In their initiatory visionary states, future shamans typically experience a journey into the Underworld, the realm of the dead. Here they are attacked by vicious demons and subjected to agonizing ordeals. Flesh is scraped from their bones, their eyeballs are torn out, and blood is sucked out of their vessels. Their bodies are hacked to pieces, boiled in cauldrons, reduced to skeletons, and dismembered. After the novice shaman has been completely annihilated, the pieces of his or her body are usually distributed among the spirits of various diseases. It is understood that in the future the shaman will be able to heal diseases caused by evil spirits, who during the initiatory crisis had feasted on his or her body. Although the details of these experiences vary considerably among different tribes and individual shamans, they all share the general atmosphere of horror and inhuman suffering.

On the journey to the land of the dead, the shaman might brave icy winds, burning forests, stormy rivers, and bloody streams. The Underworld is a dangerous and terrifying place. It may be supported by human bones, carpeted with women’s hair, teeming with toads and lizards, filled with dark boiling waters where countless souls wail in agony. The novice shaman

might cross a dangerous black river and travel on boats with corpses or spirit canoes. The rapids are flaming whirlpools, the landscape breeds sickness and death, and the evil Mistress of the Underworld rules a village of man-eaters. Altaic shamans traverse landscapes with gloomy forests and high mountains, strewn with bones of their dead predecessors and their mounts. They then confront the Lord of the Underworld, who howls and bellows like a maddened bull, appease him through gifts and trickery, and return on a wild gander. A Yakut shaman must travel through the throat and body of a monster serpent whose bowels have sharp spikes.

After the experience of death, dismemberment, and total annihilation, the shaman experiences rebirth. He or she acquires new flesh, new blood, and new eyes and ascends to the supernal realms, most often by climbing the World Tree, which joins together the three worlds and is connected with the primeval waters of life circulating through all of nature. The shaman can also experience transformation into a bird, such as an eagle, thunderbird, hawk, or condor and fly into the solar realm or alternatively be carried there by such a bird. Additional archetypal ways of reaching the supernal realms are climbing a rainbow, a chain of arrows, a holy mountain, or a pole with nine notches. From Lapland to Patagonia, from ancient times to today, the archetypes activated during shamanic ordeals and exaltations are astonishingly similar.

In this process of descent into the Underworld, death and rebirth, and ascent to the celestial realms, future shamans realize their solar identity. They experience a deep connection with forces of nature and with animals, both in their actual physical form and in their archetypal form. In the shamanic lore, these latter forces are known as “power animals” and possess certain unique features: capability to talk, to appear in human form, and navigate in an atypical element. (For example, a land mammal or serpent power animal can fly.) Power animals are not individuals in the ordinary sense; they represent the entire genus or species, such as Coyote, Bear, or Raven. The visionary experiences of the initiatory crisis typically bring deep insights into the nature and origin of diseases and help future shamans heal themselves from various emotional, psychosomatic, and often even physical disorders, which had previously plagued their lives. For this reason, anthropologists often refer to shamans as “wounded healers.”

To be recognized as a shaman requires successful completion of the initiatory crisis, integration of the achieved insights, and attainment of adequate or superior functioning in everyday reality. The experience of a dramatic holotropic state is not sufficient, in and of itself, to qualify an individual as a shaman. Native cultures are capable of distinguishing real shamans from persons who are ill or crazy. Accomplished shamans are able to enter holotropic states at will, in a controlled way, and for a specific purpose, such as healing, extrasensory perception, and exploration of alternate dimensions of reality. They can also induce such states in other members of their tribes and play the role of “psychopomps,” in which they provide the necessary support and guidance for those traversing the complex territories of the Beyond.

This account of the initiation of an Avam-Samoyed shaman, recorded by A. A. Popov, illustrates the experiences that open individuals to a shamanic career:

Stricken with smallpox, the future shaman remained unconscious for three days, so nearly dead that on the third day he was almost buried. He saw himself go down to Hell and, after many adventures, was carried to an island, in the middle of which stood a young birch tree, which reached up to Heaven. It was the Tree of the Lord of the Earth, and the Lord gave him a branch of it to make himself a drum. Next he came to a mountain; passing through an opening, he met a naked man plying the bellows at an immense fire on which was a kettle. The man caught him with a hook, cut off his head, and chopped his body to bits and put them all into the kettle. There he boiled the body for three years, and then forged him a head on an anvil. Finally he fished out the bones, which were floating in a river, put them together, and covered them with flesh. During his adventures in the Other World, the future shaman met several semi-divine personages, in human or animal form, and each of them revealed doctrines to him or taught him secrets of the healing art. When he awoke in his yurt, among his relatives, he was initiated and could begin to shamanize (Popov 1936).

A Yakut myth describes the ordeals associated with the birth of shamans:

The Mother of Animals, a large female eagle with iron feathers, claws, and beak, hatches shamans—the great ones for three years on high branches of the tree and less eminent ones one year on lower branches of the tree. The baby is entrusted to a spirit-shamaness who has one eye, one hand, and one leg. She feeds him blood in a cradle of iron and then hands him to three black spirits who hack him to pieces and scatter the remains. The shaman will be able to heal the diseases whose evil source has been given a piece of his flesh. Great shamans experience dismemberment three times.

Although the shamanism of the Siberian and Ural-Altaic peoples has received the primary attention of anthropologists and ethnographers, similar practices and experiences, including initiatory illness, exist among peoples in Southeast Asia, Australia, Oceania, Africa, and among Indians in North and South America. According to renowned authority Mircea Eliade, shamans have contributed considerably to the knowledge of death and of the experiences associated with it (“funerary geography”) (Eliade 1964). The stories of their journeys are also among the most important sources of eschatological mythology. Through repeated magical journeys of the shamans, the unknown and terrifying world of death assumed form and structure and gradually became more familiar and acceptable to their people. Little by little, the region of death became knowable, and death itself was seen primarily as a rite of passage to a spiritual mode of being.

Healing and Transformative Potential of the Shamanic Crisis

Mircea Eliade referred to shamanism as the “archaic technique of ecstasy” in the sense of its original Greek meaning—stepping out of oneself (ek-stasis). The visionary journeys of the

shamans are not always blissful and joyful; they often are dark and agonizing. As we will see in Chapter 8, many experiences characterizing the shamanic initiatory crises, such as being engulfed, subjected to extreme emotional and physical suffering, being tried by fire, exposed to scatological materials, and dismembered, are known from the sessions of psychedelic subjects focusing on the process of psychospiritual death and rebirth.

Mainstream psychiatry and anthropology tend to ascribe pathological labels to the psychospiritual crises of the shamans and to the shamans themselves. The diagnoses range from schizophrenia, borderline psychosis, and epilepsy to severe hysteria and “culturally constituted defense.” The shamanic crisis is distinctly different from schizophrenia. It has unusual phenomenology with great emphasis on the mystical dimension, no progressive deterioration of personality, and superior functioning in the culture. Master shamans are at home in the non-ordinary, as well as ordinary reality, and they operate successfully in both realms. Typically they participate actively in social, economic, and even political affairs—as hunters, gardeners, farmers, politicians, artists, and responsible family members. Shamans display remarkable energy and stamina, a high level of intelligence, and considerable leadership skills. They have superior grasp of complex data concerning myth and rituals but, above all, they have profound knowledge of the experiential territories of dying and death.

Modern consciousness research and psychotherapeutic work with individuals experiencing spontaneous episodes of non-ordinary states of consciousness have brought a radically new perspective to the “shamanic illness.” Properly understood and supported, psychospiritual crises of various kinds can result in healing, spiritual opening, and deep positive transformation of personality. They can also provide profound insights into the nature and dimensions of the human psyche, emotional and psychosomatic disorders, and the nature of reality. Shamanic initiatory crises thus belong to a large category of experiences which can break down rigid ego structures and reconstitute them in a positive way (Dabrowski 1967, Silverman 1967 and 1970, Perry 1974 and 1976). Rather than being manifestations of mental illness, psychospiritual crises represent “spiritual emergencies” and offer the potential for healing and profound transformation (Grof and Grof 1990).



The Sorcerer. Detail from wall painting in Les Trois Frères cave shows anthropomorphic figure, most likely a Paleolithic shaman.

RITES OF PASSAGE: DEATH AND REBIRTH IN RITUAL TRANSFORMATION

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, canceled, Made nothing? Are you willing to be made nothing? Dipped into oblivion? If not, you will never really change.

– D.H. Lawrence, Phoenix

RITUAL EVENTS KNOWN AS RITES of passage represent another important example of socially sanctioned institutions that have provided experiential training for dying in ancient civilizations and native cultures. This term was coined by the Dutch anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, who recognized their importance and universal distribution and wrote the first scientific treatise on the subject (van Gennep 1960). Ceremonies of this kind once existed in all known native cultures and are still being performed in many preindustrial societies. Their main purpose is to redefine, transform, and consecrate individuals, groups, and even entire cultures.

Rites of passage mark critical changes in the life of an individual or a culture. Their timing frequently coincides with major physiological transitions, such as childbirth, circumcision, puberty, marriage, menopause, and dying—occasions in which the body, psyche, social status, and sacred role of the initiates are changing significantly. Similar rituals are also associated with initiation into warrior status, acceptance into secret societies, calendrical festivals of renewal, and geographical moves of human groups into new territories.

In Western industrial civilization, the time of major transition from one stage in life to another is usually fraught with a negative value judgment. This is certainly true for puberty, middle age, senescence, and, of course, dying. Even birth has taken on a negative cast in our culture, where the delivering mother is routinely relegated to the role of the patient and goes to a hospital to deliver her child. Old people are also denigrated, as well as those afflicted by diseases, particularly those who have been designated as “terminally ill.” Such persons are between life and death and therefore no longer viable social entities; for this reason, the dying are often seen as social and economic burdens.

Typical Stages of Rites of Passage

Arnold van Gennep recognized that in all the cultures he had studied, rituals of this kind followed a standard pattern with three distinct stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. In the first stage, separation, the initiated individuals are removed from their social fabric—family, clan, and the rest of the tribe. During the ensuing period of isolation, they may be completely alone or may share this unsettling situation with their peers. Loss of the familiar ground and absence of a new one to replace it relegate them to an indeterminate state of liminality, a limbo condition described by anthropologists as being “betwixt and between.” Initiates typically react to this situation with a feeling of intense grief over the loss of the old way of being and can also

become afraid of uprootedness, of the unexpected, and of the unknown. In this sense their experience is very similar to a “spiritual emergency,” where familiar reality is forcefully replaced by the challenges of the inner world. However, in group initiations conducted in tribal rites of passage this frightening period of separation has its positive side in that the neophytes typically develop a deep sense of bonding and community with each other.

At this point, the elders impart the culture’s cosmology and mythology and prepare the initiates for the next stage of the ritual, the transition. Such thorough and thoughtful preparation is essential for the optimal outcome of the transformative process. The initiates obtain much of this information indirectly through mythological stories, songs, and dance. The elders also share their knowledge of the experiential territories the initiates are about to traverse. In this way the initiates learn that the journey that is ahead of them, as strange and ominous as it might seem, has a timeless dimension. It has been and will be traveled by many others—by sacred ancestors, as well as by past and future initiates. Knowing the universal nature of this process can be reassuring for the neophytes and help them face the difficult aspects of the transformation process.

In the second stage, which van Gennep termed transition, the neophytes move from predominantly intellectual learning to profound direct experiences of holotropic states of consciousness, induced by powerful mind-altering procedures, “technologies of the sacred.” These methods combine in various ways drumming and other forms of percussion, music, chanting, rhythmic dancing, changes of breathing, and cultivation of special forms of awareness. Extended social and sensory isolation, such as a stay in a cave, desert, arctic ice, or in high mountains, also plays an important role in inducing holotropic states. Some of the more extreme physiological interventions include extended sleep deprivation, dehydration, fasting, using powerful laxatives and purgatives, massive bloodletting, genital mutilation, and infliction of excruciating pain. The extreme nature of many of these techniques emphasizes the value that various human groups have traditionally ascribed to holotropic states.

Among the most powerful technologies of the sacred are various psychedelic plants. Their use for ritual and spiritual purposes reaches back thousands of years. The legendary divine potion referred to as “haoma” in the ancient Persian Zend Avesta and as “soma” in India was used by the Indo-Iranian tribes several millennia ago and was probably the most important inspiration of the Vedic religion and philosophy. Preparations from different varieties of hemp have been smoked and ingested under various names (hashish, charas, bhang, ganja, kif, marijuana) in the Oriental countries, in Africa, and in the Caribbean area for recreation, pleasure, and during religious ceremonies. They have represented an important sacrament for such diverse groups as the Brahmans, certain Sufi orders, ancient Skythians, and the Jamaican Rastafarians.

Ceremonial use of various psychedelic materials also has a long history in Central America. Highly effective mind-altering plants were well known in several pre-Hispanic Indian cultures—among the Aztecs, Mayans, and Toltecs. Most famous of these are the Mexican cactus peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*), the sacred mushroom *teonanacatl* (*Psilocybe mexicana*), and

ololiuqui, seeds of different varieties of the morning glory plant (*Ipomoea violacea* and *Turbina corymbosa*). These materials have been used as sacraments until this day by the Huichol, Mazatec, Chichimeca, Cora, and other Mexican Indian tribes, as well as the Native American Church.

The famous South American yajé or ayahuasca is a decoction from a jungle liana (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) combined with other plant additives. The Amazonian area and the Caribbean islands are also known for a variety of psychedelic snuffs. Aboriginal tribes in Africa ingest and inhale preparations from the bark of the iboga shrub (*Tabernanthe iboga*) and use them in small quantities as stimulants and in larger dosages in initiation rituals for men and women. The psychedelic compounds of animal origin include the secretions of the skin of certain toads (*Bufo alvarius*) and the meat of the Pacific fish *Kyphosus fuscus*. This list represents only a small fraction of psychedelic materials that have been used over many centuries in ritual and spiritual life of various countries of the world.

Various combinations of these practices induce in the initiates profound experiences resulting in healing, spiritual opening, deep personality transformation, and a higher level of integration. Such experiences typically take the form of psychospiritual death and rebirth and encounter with numinous dimensions of reality. In the context of such rituals, these experiences are then interpreted as dying to the old role and being born into the new one. For example, in the puberty rites the initiates enter the ritual as boys or girls and emerge from it as adults, with all the rights and duties that come with this status.

The third stage in van Gennep's triad is incorporation, in which the individual is reintegrated into his or her community in a new role, defined by the type of the ceremony: as an adult, a married person, a parent, a warrior, and so on. In a rite of passage, the individual or social group leaves behind one mode of being and, after passing through a period of liminality, moves into another, completely new existential condition. Newly initiated persons are not the same as those who entered the initiation process. Having undergone a deep psychospiritual transformation, they have a personal connection with the numinous dimensions of existence, a vastly expanded world view, a better self-image, and a different system of values. Because they have faced and survived a convincing experience of personal annihilation, they have transcended their identification with the body and ego, lost fear of death, and attained a new attitude toward life.

Okipa Rite of Passage

An example of a powerful and complex rite of passage was the Okipa festival of the Mandans, a tribe of North American Plains Indians who lived on the Missouri River. This ritual, which involved extreme physical pain and mutilation, shows how highly some cultures value transformative experiences and to what extremes they are willing to go in pursuing them. Certainly many other similar rites of passage are not nearly as radical or as elaborate as the Okipa festival. Although the core of this extraordinary ritual was initiation of young men into adulthood and into warrior status, it also included ceremonial dances for the purpose of securing

successful buffalo hunts and appeasing evil spirits, and a celebration of the ending of the mythological flood.

The Okipa ritual began as a ceremonial figure representing the First Man, the Original Ancestor, painted with white clay and wearing a splendid robe, led the group of young male initiates covered with clay of different colors to the ceremonial site. After smoking his sacred medicine pipe, the “First Man” gave the initiates an encouraging talk and appointed an old medicine man to be the Master of the Ceremonies, who made sure that none of the young men escaped from the lodge, ate, drank, or slept during the four days of preparation for the ordeal. Through prayers, he also maintained connection with the Great Spirit, asking for the success of the procedure. During this preparation time, the rest of the tribe gathered outside of the lodge, where they performed several rituals and provided various forms of entertainment around the Great Canoe, a reminder of the flood. They chanted many prayers to the Great Spirit, asking for continuous supply of buffaloes and encouragement for the young initiates. Much of their energy was focused on invocations of the Evil Spirit, O-kee-hee-dee. This type of effort to come to terms with the dark aspects of existence is characteristic of the rites of passage and healing ceremonies in many cultures.

On the fourth day, a masked figure representing O-kee-hee-dee finally appeared, almost naked and painted mostly black, with some white. Adorned with a colossal wooden penis that had a black shaft and a large vermillion head, he stormed the village and ran around in a frenzy, chasing women and wreaking havoc. The general panic and chaos kept building and then reached a sudden turning point when the Master of the Ceremonies confronted the Evil Spirit and immobilized him by the charm of his sacred pipe. O-kee-hee-dee, bereft of his magic power, was tantalized, ridiculed, and humiliated, particularly by the women, and chased out of the village.

The women’s triumphant return with his gigantic penis as a trophy was the signal for the beginning of the ordeal in the lodge. There the young initiates were raised above the ground by cords attached to skewers piercing their flesh. Heavy weights, such as shields, bows, quivers, and buffalo skulls, were suspended from the skewers, and the initiates were rotated around a pole until they lost consciousness. They were then lowered to the ground, and when they regained consciousness, their little fingers were chopped off and offered to the Great Spirit.

The final stage of the Okipa ceremony was the Last Race. With the weights still attached to their bodies, the young men were taken outside to the ceremonial area, where they ran in large circles, dragging the weights behind them, each striving to endure longer than his peers, without collapsing or “dying,” as it was called. Even after they fainted, totally exhausted by physical exertion and excruciating pain, the initiates were dragged around until all of the weights were torn out from their flesh. Their mangled bodies lay on the ground until they regained consciousness and staggered through the crowds to their lodges, where they were welcomed by their relatives, who congratulated them on their great achievement. The immature youngsters

who they had been were considered to have died in this ordeal and been reborn as adults and brave warriors.

While these practices might seem extreme from a Western point of view, ceremonies of this kind typically enhance several key attributes: emotional and physical wellbeing, one's sense of personal strength and independence, feelings of deep connection with nature and the cosmos, and a sense of social belonging and cohesion. The inner experiences and external events of the rite of passage communicate to the neophytes a profound message, the core insight of all human transformative processes, including spiritual emergencies: one can suffer through the chaos of liminality and dying, undergo an experience of total annihilation and death and emerge feeling healed, reborn, rejuvenated, and stronger than before. This awareness reduces greatly the fear of death and enhances one's ability to enjoy life. Such transformation profoundly benefits not only the individual initiates but also the entire community.

In the Okipa rite of passage a significant part of the transformative ordeal was enacted in a realistic and concrete way; however, this is not the only possibility. Various mind-altering techniques of a much gentler kind can trigger similar sequences of suffering, death, and rebirth by activating the psyche's own inner repositories, without any physical damage to the body. A purely symbolic experience of this kind can have an identical impact. In individuals undergoing spiritual emergencies, episodes of this kind often occur spontaneously. Even a cursory comparison reveals that many of the aspects of rites of passage are closely related to the phenomenology of psychedelic and holotropic experiences, which originate on the perinatal (birth-related) level of the unconscious. (The perinatal level of the unconscious is discussed in Chapter 8).

Themes of Birth, Sex, and Death in Rites of Passage

The inner experiences of initiates in these rituals involve a unique mixture of themes related to birth, sex, and death, the same triad that characterizes experiences associated with the reliving of the final stage of birth (see Chapter 8). The external symbolism used in the initiatory procedures reflects the same strange amalgam of these three important aspects of life. For example, the initiation hut might be referred to as "vagina" or "womb," and often the same term also means tomb. In some cultures, the word used for gestation applies equally to burial and to ritual initiation. Conversely, tombs are often built in the shape of wombs, and the dead are buried in fetal position. Pregnant women can be referred to as being dead and are considered reborn after they deliver their children. Among the Iatmul, a New Guinea tribe, the entrance into the initiation hut is called the clitoris gate.

Rites of passage often use symbolic allusions to biological birth to support the experience of the "second birth" and ritual transformation. Initiates are frequently stripped of all their clothes, their heads and bodies are shorn, blood of sacrificial animals is poured over their heads, and their scalps might be smeared with feces. In some instances, initiates are wrapped for several days in hides. Such practices are clearly attempting to recreate the situation of prenatal life, birth, and postnatal care. The emotional and physical suffering, painful separation, and struggle for

survival involved in many rites of passage closely resemble comparable phenomena that characterize perinatal experiences, both actual in real life and symbolic in holotropic states. In perinatal sessions, experiences of psychospiritual death and rebirth are typically intermingled with reliving of biological birth and often also have a strong sexual component. In rites of passage, the encounter with death, which is an integral part of birth, can be staged in such a realistic fashion that it involves serious risk of physical trauma or even biological destruction of the initiate.

The similarity between rites of passage and the perinatal process in deep experiential work can be seen not only in relation to the specific content of the two, but also in their general pattern. Van Gennep's stage of separation closely parallels the onset of biological delivery, when the uterine contractions compress the arteries supplying oxygen and nourishment to the fetus, and the uterine cervix is still closed. This interruption of the placental circulation between the mother and the child severs the meaningful connection between them and effectively separates them from each other. Van Gennep's stage of transition then corresponds to the experience of the passage through the birth canal after the cervix opens. This death and birth struggle marks the radical transformation of the aquatic organism (the fetus) into an air-breathing organism (the newborn). Finally, van Gennep's stage of incorporation has its perinatal counterpart in the child's reunion with its mother after the experience of (re)birth.

Societal Implications

Rites of passage are cultural and spiritual events, in which initiates can experience, confront, and express powerful emotions and physical energies associated with perinatal and transpersonal matrices, which we all harbor in deep recesses of our unconscious psyche. In view of the elemental nature of the psychological forces involved, uncontrolled manifestation and acting out of these energies could be destructive for the community. In this context it is important to consider the conclusions of Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Margaret Mead, Mircea Eliade and other outstanding anthropologists, namely that rites of passage are institutions of critical importance for the cohesive and harmonious functioning of the community (van Gennep 1960, Turner 1969, Mead 1973, Eliade 1958).

Thus the absence of meaningful rites of passage might contribute to the various forms of social psychopathology observed in contemporary society. Many impulses of a destructive and antisocial nature, instead of being acted out and expressed with social sanctioning in a safe and structured sacred context, leak insidiously into our everyday life and manifest in a number of individual and societal problems. Many researchers have suggested that the escalating sexual acting-out, delinquency, and abuse of alcohol and narcotics among adolescents in the industrial countries could be remedied by meaningful rites of passage for this age group (Mead 1973; Mahdi, Foster, and Little 1987; Mahdi, Christopher, and Meade, 1996).

ANCIENT MYSTERIES OF DEATH AND REBIRTH

Nothing is higher than these mysteries. They have sweetened our character and softened our customs; they have made us pass from the condition of savages to true humanity. They have not only shown us the way to live joyfully, but they have taught us to die with hope.

-Marcus Tullius Cicero describing the Eleusinian Mysteries (De Legibus)

THE MYSTERIES of death and rebirth represented another important form of experiential training for dying in the ancient world. These ritual events were based on mythological stories featuring various deities, who died and were brought back to life, or visited the Underworld, the realm of the dead, and safely returned. Understanding the dynamics of these mysteries and their relationship to the stories of death and rebirth of gods and heroes requires an entirely new interpretation of the nature and function of myths. Myths are traditionally considered to be products of human fantasy and imagination. However, the work of C. G. Jung and Joseph Campbell brought about a radically new understanding of mythology. According to these two seminal thinkers, myths are not fictitious stories about adventures of imaginary characters in nonexistent countries and thus arbitrary products of individual human fantasy. Rather, myths originate in the collective unconscious of humanity and are manifestations of the primordial organizing principles of the psyche and the cosmos, which Jung called archetypes (Jung 1976).

Archetypes and the Imaginal World

Archetypes are timeless primordial principles underlying, forming, and informing the fabric of the material world. The tendency to interpret the world in terms of archetypal principles first emerged in ancient Greece and was one of the most striking characteristics of Greek philosophy and culture. Archetypes can be seen from several different perspectives (Tarnas 2006). In Homeric epics they took the form of personified mythological figures or deities, such as Zeus, Poseidon, Hera, Aphrodite, or Ares. In the philosophy of Plato, they were described as pure metaphysical principles—transcendent Ideas, Forms, or divine archai—which existed independently in a realm not accessible to ordinary human senses. In modern times, C. G. Jung revived and reformulated the concept of archetypes, describing them primarily as psychological principles (Jung 1959).

For many centuries, two schools of philosophy have hotly debated the nature of Platonic Ideas. While the realists have asserted that they are ontologically real and supraordinated to the material world, nominalists have seen them as nothing more than “names,” abstractions from objects, which we encounter in everyday life. Modern psychology and consciousness research have brought important supportive evidence for the position of the realists. Jungians refer to the world of the archetypal figures and realms as “imaginal” to distinguish it from imaginary

products of the individual human mind. Although it can be accessed through intrapsychic self-exploration, the imaginal world has objective existence, and those who experience it can reach consensual agreement on its various aspects.

Archetypes are timeless essences, cosmic ordering principles which can also manifest as mythic personifications, or specific deities of various cultures. They express themselves through the individual psyche and its deeper processes, but they do not originate in the human mind and are not its products. They are supraordinated to the individual psyche and function as its governing principles. According to Jung's later work, archetypes are "psychoid" in nature; they operate in the twilight zone between consciousness and matter. They shape not only the processes in the human psyche, but also the events in the physical world and human history.

James Hillman offers a brilliant description of archetypes in the preface to his book *Re-Visioning Psychology*:

All ways of speaking of archetypes are translations from one metaphor to another. Even sober operational definitions in the language of science or logic are no less metaphorical than an image which presents the archetypes as root ideas, psychic organs, figures of myth, typical styles of existence, or dominant fantasies that govern consciousness. There are many other metaphors for describing them: immaterial potential of structure, like invisible crystals in solution or forms in plants that suddenly show forth under certain conditions; patterns of instinctual behavior like those in animals that direct actions along unswerving paths; the genres and topoi in literature; the recurring typicalities in history; the basic syndromes in psychiatry; the paradigmatic thought models in science; the worldwide figures, rituals, and relationships in anthropology (Hillman 1977).

In mythology, the basic archetypal figures, realms, and themes, in their most general and abstract form, are universally distributed: specific variations of these basic mythological motifs exist in different cultures and at various periods of history. For example, a powerful universal archetype, that of the Great Mother Goddess, takes in various cultures the forms of specific mother goddesses, such as Isis, Virgin Mary, Cybele, or Kali. Similarly, the concepts of Heaven, Paradise, and Hell can be found in many cultures of the world, but the specific form of these archetypal domains varies from one instance to another. The same is true for timeless themes, such as that of the evil stepmother, the prodigal son, or the death and rebirth of gods and heroes. The "collective unconscious," Jung's term for the place where archetypes reside, represents a shared cultural heritage of all humanity throughout the ages.

The Hero with A Thousand Faces

In 1948, after many years of systematically studying mythologies of various cultures of the world, Joseph Campbell published his ground-breaking book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which in the following decades profoundly influenced research and understanding in the field (Campbell 1968). Analyzing a broad spectrum of myths from various parts of the world,

Campbell realized that they all contained variations of one universal archetypal formula, which he called the monomyth. This was the story of the hero, either male or female, who leaves his or her home ground and, after fantastic adventures, returns as a deified being. Campbell found that the archetype of the hero's journey typically has three stages, similar to those described earlier as characteristic sequences in traditional rites of passage: separation, initiation, and return. The hero leaves the familiar ground or is forcefully separated from it by an external force, is transformed through a series of extraordinary ordeals and adventures, and finally is again incorporated into his or her original society in a new role.

A typical myth of the heroic journey begins when the ordinary life of the protagonist is suddenly interrupted by the intrusion of elements that are magical in nature and belong to another order of reality. Campbell refers to this invitation to adventure as a "call." If the hero responds to the call and accepts the challenge, he or she embarks on an adventure that involves visits to strange territories, encounters with fantastic animals and superhuman beings, and numerous ordeals. This adventure often culminates in an experience of death and subsequent rebirth. After the successful completion of the journey, the hero returns home and lives a full and rewarding life as a deified being—worldly leader, healer, seer, or spiritual teacher. In Campbell's own words, the basic formula for the hero's journey can be summarized as follows: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Campbell's inquisitive and incisive intellect went beyond simply recognizing the universality of this myth over time and space. His curiosity drove him to ask what makes this myth universal. Why does the theme of the hero's journey appeal to cultures of all times and countries, even if they differ in every other respect? Campbell's answer has the simplicity and unrelenting logic of all brilliant insights: the monomyth of the hero's journey is a blueprint for the transformative crisis, which all human beings can experience when the deep contents of the unconscious psyche emerge into consciousness. The hero's journey describes nothing less than the experiential territory that an individual must traverse during times of profound transformation.

Death and Rebirth of Gods and Heroes

The encounter with death and subsequent rebirth is a particularly powerful theme that recurs with remarkable frequency in the mythology of the hero's journey. Mythologies of all times and countries feature dramatic stories about gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines who have died and been resurrected. Variations on this theme describe mythological characters who have descended into the realm of the dead and, having undergone unimaginable ordeals and challenges, returned to earth endowed with special powers. The central theme of the Christian religion, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is the most familiar such story, one that has profoundly influenced human history. However, this theme is not in any way unique to

Christianity and plays an important role in the mythologies of many cultures and historical periods.

The oldest stories of death and rebirth are the Sumerian myth of the goddess Inanna and her descent into the Underworld and the Egyptian myth describing the death, dismemberment, and resurrection of Osiris. Among the contributions of Greek mythology are the narratives describing the abduction of the goddess Persephone into the Underworld, the dismemberment and rebirth of Dionysus, and the encounters with death experienced by Attis, Adonis, and Orpheus. The underworld adventures of the Greek heroes Hercules, Theseus, and Odysseus also belong to this category. The Mayan Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque and the Aztec Plumed Serpent Quetzalcoatl are famous Mesoamerican examples of mythological beings who experienced death and rebirth. In a less obvious symbolic form, the same motif is sometimes represented as the experience of being devoured and regorged by a terrifying monster. The examples here range from the biblical Jonah, who spent three days and nights in the belly of the “great fish,” to the Greek hero Jason and Saint Margaret of Antioch, who were both swallowed by a dragon in their respective stories and later managed to escape.

Psychedelic research and work with experiential therapies have shown that the archetype of death and rebirth is closely connected with biological birth. This explains why this motif is so universal and appears so frequently in mythology. Passage through the birth canal is a life-threatening event and, as a result, death and birth are deeply linked in our unconscious. Consequently sequences of psychological death and rebirth are among the most frequent experiences observed in holotropic states induced by various means, as well as those occurring spontaneously. They play an extremely important role in the process of psychological transformation and spiritual opening.

The Mysteries of Death and Rebirth

In many parts of the world, the myths of death and rebirth provided the ideological basis for sacred mysteries, powerful ritual events in which neophytes experienced death and rebirth and profound psychospiritual transformation. Very little is known of the methods used in these mysteries to induce holotropic states, since they were either kept secret or the specific information about them was lost over time. However, these procedures were probably similar to those used in shamanic practices and rites of passage: drumming, chanting, dancing, changes in respiratory rhythm, exposure to physical stress and pain, and experiencing seeming or actual life-threatening situations. Among the most effective tools were undoubtedly mind-altering potions containing plant materials with psychoactive properties.

The powerful and often terrifying experiences induced in the initiates represented unique opportunities to contact deities and divine realms and were perceived as necessary, desirable, and ultimately healing. Moreover in some cases, voluntary exposure to these extreme states of consciousness was considered a protection against true insanity, as illustrated by the Greek myth of Dionysus, who invited the citizens of Thebes to join him in what he called the Lesser Dance. This term referred to the rapture of the Bacchanalia, orgiastic rituals which involved ingesting

alcoholic beverages, wild dancing, and the unleashing of powerful emotions and instinctual drives. Dionysus promised the Thebans that the Lesser Dance would take them to places they never dreamed possible. When they refused his offer, he felt offended and forced them into the Greater Dance of Dionysus, a spell of dangerous madness, in which they mistook their prince for a wild animal and killed him. The insane queen personally impaled the severed head of her son on a spear and carried it back into the city.

As this popular myth indicates, the ancient Greeks realized that the dangerous forces harbored in the psyche must be expressed in the proper context. The powerful experiences that initiates encountered in the mysteries, particularly psychospiritual death and rebirth, had a remarkable healing and transformative potential in this regard. We can refer here to the testimony of two giants of ancient Greek philosophy, Plato and Aristotle. It is especially significant that this testimony originated in Greece, the cradle of European civilization, since Westerners tend to ignore the evidence from “primitive” and exotic cultures where shamanism or rites of passage were practiced.

In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, Plato discusses four types of madness conferred by the gods: erotic madness due to possession by Aphrodite and Eros, prophetic madness from the intervention of Apollo, artistic madness due to inspiration by one of the Muses, and ritual or telestic madness caused by Dionysus. The great philosopher vividly describes the therapeutic potential of telestic madness and uses an example from the less-known variety of the Greek mysteries, the Corybantic rites. Wild dancing to flutes and drums, culminating in an explosive emotional release, resulted in a state of profound relaxation and tranquility (Plato 1961a).

Plato’s famous disciple Aristotle was the first to state explicitly that the process of fully experiencing and releasing repressed emotions, which he called *catharsis* (purification), represented an effective treatment of mental disorders. Aristotle said that the mysteries of death and rebirth provided a powerful context for this process; specifically that wine, aphrodisiacs, and music could be used to induce extraordinary arousal of passions leading to a healing *catharsis*. He supported the basic thesis of the Orphic cult (one of the most important mystical schools of the time)—that the chaos and frenzy of the mysteries were conducive to greater order.

Among the oldest mysteries of death and rebirth were the Babylonian and Assyrian rites of Ishtar and Tammuz, based on the myth of the Mother Goddess Inanna (Ishtar) and her descent into the Underworld ruled by her sister, the terrible goddess Ereshkigal. The purpose of Ishtar’s visit to the realm of the dead was to obtain an elixir that would restore to life the vegetation god Tammuz, who was both her son and husband. In the ancient Egyptian temples of Isis and Osiris, initiates underwent complex ordeals under the guidance of high priests to overcome the fear of death and gain access to esoteric knowledge about the universe and human nature. During this procedure, neophytes experienced identification with the god Osiris, who according to the myth underlying these mysteries was killed and dismembered by his evil brother, Seth. Osiris was subsequently brought back to life by his two sisters, Isis and Nephtys, and became the ruler of the Underworld. In this context, the theme of death and rebirth was linked to the diurnal-

nocturnal cycle and to the archetypal journey of the sun god across the sky and through the Underworld.

Mystery religions and sacred rites were abundant in ancient Greece, Asia Minor, and the neighboring countries. The Eleusinian Mysteries were based on an esoteric interpretation of the myth of the Greek fertility goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone. Persephone was kidnapped by Hades, the god of the Underworld, but was then released by him at the intervention of Zeus, with the condition that she would return to Hades for one third of each year. This myth, usually considered an allegory about the cyclical growth of plants during the seasons of the year, became for the Eleusinian initiates a symbol for the spiritual struggles of the soul, periodically imprisoned in matter and liberated.

The Orphic cult revolved around the legend of the deified Thracian bard Orpheus, the incomparable musician and singer, who visited the Underworld in an unsuccessful effort to liberate his beloved Eurydice from the bondage of death. Orpheus himself died a tragic death when he was torn to pieces by Ciconian women for interfering in the Bacchanalia. According to the legend, his severed head, thrown into the Hebrus River, continued to sing and give forth oracles. The Dionysian rites, or Bacchanalia, were based on the mythological story of the young Dionysus, who was dismembered by the Titans and then resurrected when Pallas Athene rescued his heart. In the Dionysian rites, the initiates experienced identification with the murdered and reborn god by drinking intoxicating beverages, orgiastic dancing, running through the countryside, and eating raw animal flesh. The Samothracian mysteries of the Corybants were closely related to the Dionysian festivals. The associated ritual drama depicted the murder of Cadmillus by his three brothers.

The Mithraic cult, another major mystery religion of antiquity, was the sister religion of Christianity and its very serious competitor for a world religion. It began to spread throughout the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., reached its peak in the third century, and succumbed to Christianity at the end of the fourth century. At the cult's height, the underground Mithraic sanctuaries (mithraea) could be found from the shores of the Black Sea to the mountains of Scotland and to the border of the Sahara Desert (Ulansey 1989).

The famous myth of Adonis, another story about a dying god, inspired many mysteries in the ancient world. During her pregnancy, his mother Smyrna was turned into a myrrh tree by the gods. Adonis was born when a wild boar opened the tree with its tusks and freed the baby. Aphrodite was so charmed by Adonis' beauty that she handed him over to the care of Persephone, the goddess of the Underworld. When Persephone later refused to return Adonis, Zeus decided that he should spend one third of each year with Persephone and one third with Aphrodite. The remaining third was left to his discretion, but legend has it that Adonis always spent two thirds of each year with Aphrodite. Mysteries based on this myth were annually celebrated in many parts of Egypt, Phoenicia, and Byblos. The closely related Phrygian mysteries were held in the name of Attis, a deity who castrated himself, died, and was resurrected by the Great Mother Goddess Cybele. His self-mutilation and death were the result

of frenzy which Agdistis, the mother of Attis, imparted on him in her jealous rage to prevent him from getting married.

The myth underlying the Nordic mysteries of Odin (Wotan) was the story of Odin's murdered and resurrected favorite son, Balder. According to the myth, Balder was young and beautiful and was the only peaceful god in Valhalla. The trickster Loki, the personification of evil, duped the blind god of fate, Hoder, to shoot Balder with a mistletoe arrow, the only weapon that could hurt him. Balder was pierced through the heart and died. Hel, the goddess of death, moved by the pleas of the heartbroken gods, promised to send Balder back to the land of the living on one condition: everything in the world, dead or alive, must weep for him. And everything did weep, except Loki, and so Balder had to remain in the Underworld. However, the myth predicted that after the final Battle of Ragnarok, when a new world was to arise from its ashes, Balder would be reborn. In the mysteries of Odin the neophyte drank sanctified mead from a bowl made of a human skull. Identified with Balder, the initiate underwent a sacred ordeal in a complex of nine underground chambers and was able to unveil the mystery of Odin, the most precious secrets of nature and the human soul.

In the Druidic mysteries of Britain the boundary between symbolic and biological death was rather blurred. After having been buried alive in a coffin, the candidate was sent to sea in an open boat as a symbolic reenactment of the death of the Sun God. In this unusual ordeal many initiates lost their lives; those who survived the demanding ritual were referred to as reborn.

The specifics of the mind-altering procedures involved in these secret rites have remained for the most part unknown. However, the sacred potion kykeon that played a critical role in the Eleusinian Mysteries was most likely a concoction containing alkaloids of ergot similar to LSD. It is also highly probable that psychedelic materials were involved in the bacchanalia and other types of rites. Ancient Greeks did not know how to distill alcohol and yet, according to the reports, the wines used in Dionysian rituals had to be diluted three to twenty times, and a mere three cups brought some initiates "to the brink of insanity" (Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck 1978). Only the addition of psychedelic materials to these alcoholic beverages could account for such a profound effect on the psyche.

The cultural importance of these mysteries for the ancient world and their as yet unacknowledged role in the history of European civilization become evident when we realize that among their initiates were many famous and illustrious figures of antiquity. The list of neophytes included the mathematician Pythagoras, the philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Epictetus, the military leader Alkibiades, the playwright Euripides, the historian Plutarch, and the poet Pindaros. Another famous initiate, Emperor Marcus Aurelius, was fascinated by the eschatological hopes offered by these rites. Roman statesman and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero took part in these mysteries and wrote an exalted report about their effects and their impact on the antique civilization in his book *De Legibus* (Cicero 1977).

The Mysteries of Eleusis

The most important mysteries of antiquity were celebrated for almost two thousand years (c. 1500 B.C.–A.D. 400) in honor of the Greek fertility goddess Demeter and her daughter Persephone at Eleusis, a Greek town situated about sixteen miles west of Athens. They represent a particularly good example of these important practices both because of their cultural significance and the amount of information we have about them.

The events leading to the founding of the shrine of Eleusis are described in an epic poem from around the end of the seventh century B.C., known as *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*:

One day, while Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was picking flowers in the lovely meadows, she was abducted by Hades, god of the Underworld. Her mother searched for her in vain, finally learning from Helios of the abduction of her daughter. Sorely afflicted, Demeter became alienated from Olympus, since she even came to know that Zeus had been in agreement with the kidnapping. After an unsuccessful search for Persephone, Demeter came to Eleusis dressed as a simple woman and found friendly abode in the palace of the king of Eleusis, Keleos, and his wife Metaneira. Engaged as a nurse for their son Demophon, she tried to make him immortal by immersing him in fire. When this became known, she revealed her divinity and in gratitude for the friendly hospitality, she founded a temple in Eleusis. To castigate the Olympian gods for the abduction of her daughter, Demeter caused all of the vegetation on Earth to die, threatening humankind with extinction. The gods feared the loss of the prayers and sacrifices of humanity and begged Demeter to make the Earth fruitful again. This plea was not granted until Zeus ordered his brother Hades in the Underworld to return Persephone to her mother. Mother and daughter returned to Olympus, but henceforth Persephone had to spend a third of the year with her husband in the Underworld. When she did, winter reigned on the earth. Yet every year, when Persephone returned to earth in the spring, the plant world awoke anew with flowers and bore fruits. Before Demeter returned to the other gods on Olympus, she instructed the kings of Eleusis, Keleos and Triptolemus, how to celebrate the rites in her temple. These were secret precepts, Mysteries, to be closely guarded. Divulging them and profaning them was punished by death. In appreciation of the propitious outcome of the drama of Eleusis, Demeter bestowed upon Triptolemus, the first initiate of Eleusis, a sprig of grain and bade him to instruct humankind in agriculture, an art which had not been known to them before (Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck 1978).

The cult of Demeter and Persephone in Eleusis, which initially had been of only local importance, soon became an important part of Athenian citizenship and eventually developed into a pan-Hellenic institution. By the second half of the fifth century B.C., in the classical period of Greek culture, participation in the Eleusinian rituals, earlier restricted to Athenians, was open to all Greeks. In Hellenistic and imperial times, the mysteries had even greater prestige and were open to initiates from the entire Roman Empire. The extraordinary duration of the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were conducted regularly and without interruption every 5 years for

a period of almost 2,000 years, is impressive testimony for the power and impact of the experiences they offered. Furthermore, the mysteries did not end simply because they ceased to attract the attention of the antique world. The ceremonial activities in Eleusis were brutally interrupted when the Christian Emperor Theodosius interdicted participation in the mysteries and all other pagan cults. Shortly afterward, in A.D. 395, the invading Goths destroyed the sanctuary.

Whatever was offered in Eleusis to the initiates had to be something really extraordinary if, for many centuries, thousands of people, including many prominent figures of antiquity, were willing to travel long distances to participate. One frequent suggestion is that some form of theatrical performance was given. However, the main hall of the Eleusinian sanctuary (telestrion) was architecturally totally unsuited for this purpose. As other ancient sites such as Epidauros show, the Greeks were able to build astonishing amphitheaters with superior acoustics. The rows of massive pillars of the Eleusinian telestrion, a large chamber occupying its center (anaktoron), and the number of participants (3,000 and possibly more), would have made it impossible for many initiates to observe the show. The many surviving account books also do not record any expenses for actors or stage props. In addition, the Greeks were very sophisticated with regard to theater and could not be easily tricked and fooled, particularly not the likes of Pindaros and Sophocles, both of whom testified to the mysteries' power and extraordinary value.

The accounts of the Eleusinian experiences contained many references to astonishing visions of supernaturally brilliant light, often described in terms of antitheses and polarities, such as darkness and light or terror and bliss. Thus Aelius Aristides, writer and orator who lived during the Roman Empire, wrote that Eleusis was "both the most awesome and the most luminous of all the divine things that exist among men." Some of the most impressive visions involved encounters with deities, particularly the goddess Persephone. Emperor Marcus Aurelius, himself an initiate, counted the mysteries among "those endowments which manifest the solicitude of the gods for humanity." Another interesting aspect of the Eleusinian experiences involved allusions to biological birth. For example, Hippolytus (c. A.D. 170-236) reports: "Under a huge fire, the hierophant shouts: The Mistress has given birth to a sacred child, Brimo to Brimos." All the above characteristics apply equally to psychedelic experiences and other types of holotropic states.

An important key to this enigma is that the hierophants administered to all participants the sacred potion, called "kykeon," before the climax of the initiation. This suggests the possibility that kykeon was a preparation with remarkable psychoactive properties. Only a psychedelic potion could predictably induce such powerful experiences in thousands of people at the same time. This notion is further supported when one considers that at one point during the Classical Age (around 415 B.C.), it was discovered that many aristocratic Athenians were conducting private mysteries in their homes. This profanation of the mysteries resulted in a crackdown and infliction of harsh penalties. While it would have been hardly possible to replicate in private homes intricate theatrical special effects, it would have been easy to carry a jar of kykeon from Eleusis to Athens.

Albert Hofmann, the father of LSD, mycologist Gordon Wasson (whose story of the discovery of Mexican magic mushrooms is described in Chapter 12), and Greek scholar Carl A. P. Ruck published after years of thorough study a treatise called *The Road to Eleusis* (Wasson, Hofmann, and Ruck 1978). They concluded that kykeon contained a psychedelic ingredient obtained from ergot, with effects similar to LSD and to the Mesoamerican sacrament *ololiuqui*. To give kykeon its consciousness-altering properties, the Eleusinian priests merely had to collect the ergot, which was very common in the vicinity of the temple, pulverize it, and add it to the potion. Ergot could easily have been used as a sacrament in the temple of the goddess of grain, Demeter. At one point of the Eleusinian ritual, the priests actually presented an ear of grain to the initiates, as a reference to the barleycorn planted in the earth, which dies in order to give life to a new plant. Here we find a symbol of the annual rotation of Persephone from the darkness of the Underworld to the light of Olympus, as well as a symbol of the permanence of life in the eternal cycle of death and rebirth.

Pindaros, the greatest lyric poet of ancient Greece and himself an initiate, wrote about the impact the Eleusinian initiation had on the participants:

Blessed is he who, having seen these rites, undertakes the way beneath the Earth.
He knows the end of life, as well as its divinely granted beginning.

Dramatic mythological sequences portraying death and rebirth and other numinous experiences are extremely frequent in experiential psychotherapy, as well as in episodes of spontaneous psychospiritual crises (“spiritual emergencies”). In holotropic states this mythological material emerges spontaneously from the depths of the psyche, without any programming and often to the surprise of everybody involved. Archetypal images and entire scenes from the mythology of various cultures often appear in the experiences of individuals who have no intellectual knowledge of the mythic figures and themes they are encountering. Such archetypes as Persephone, Dionysus, Osiris, and Wotan, as well as Jesus Christ, seem to reside in the psyche of modern Westerners and come alive in holotropic states.