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The Holy Dose

Spiritual adventures with southern Oregon's psychedelic crusaders

By Alex L. Weber

Ashland, Oregon is a smart little community nestled in the foothills of the Siskiyou Mountains about 20 minutes north of the California border. Home to Southern Oregon University and host to the yearly Shakespeare Festival, Ashland is one of those places both progressive and picturesque that often occupies a top spot on waiting-room magazines' "Best Small Towns" or "Best Places to Retire" lists. It's got a walkable business district with cozy fine-dining bistros, new-age book shops and old-school hotels. It's got the requisite breathtaking views—Oregon's famed firs snake up and down steep, mist-laden hills to the east and west. It's got equal parts West-Coast hippie charm and urbane artiness, but it still retains the ruddy feel of the Northwest wilderness.

Less well-known is the fact that Ashland is home to the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen, the unofficial base in the United States for a growing alternative religion called Santo Daime. With origins in the Brazilian Amazon, Santo Daime would attract little attention if not for one fact: worshipers drink ayahuasca, an imported jungle brew that contains dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, a highly potent hallucinogen.

DMT can cause intense dissociation—the feeling that you've left your body—and everything from excruciating horror to intense euphoria. It's often associated with the near-death experience; some scientists postulate that the human brain contains otherwise dormant amounts of the psychedelic compound, and it releases that cache when your mind thinks it's done for. Ayahuasca contains DMT and is used widely by various shamans and tribes in the Amazon, where it's known as yage, hoasca, or *La Purga* ("the purge"). Santo Daime's followers, the Daimistas, refer to ayahuasca as Daime Tea, and they drink it as their one and only sacrament. The DMT-packed tea is the cornerstone of their religion and all church functions. DMT is also listed by the U.S. DEA as a Schedule-I substance, the department's strictest classification.

Ashland's Church of the Holy Light of the Queen was founded by *Padrinho* ("Godfather" in Portuguese) Jonathan Goldman, an ebullient yet laid-back former Boston acupuncturist with a working-class, midwestern Jewish upbringing and a lifelong intuition for battling the status quo. Goldman, his family and his church have been under fire from the DEA since the church formed and started hosting underground Santo Daime rituals in Ashland in 1993. Police stormed Goldman's house in a 1999 raid, and they arrested him and effectively shut down the church. He responded by filing a lawsuit against the federal government, seeking a religious freedom exemption from the Controlled Substances Act.

Nine years later, Ashland's Daimistas prevailed in an Oregon district court, and they've been drinking Daime Tea with impunity since March 2009.

Daime Tea is an entheogen—a substance meant purely for spiritual and psychotherapeutic purposes. The Daimistas say it's something everyone should be allowed to have. They believe it grants direct access to the divine and can lead to life-changing insights and sustained happiness.

I wondered, is there any real spiritual healing going on here, or are the Daimistas just futzing around with an acute psychedelic for kicks? Just who *are* these people anyway, and do they believe there's a real connection between God and drugs?

After learning of these strange folks, I had to take a trip to Ashland to find out the answers.

The way Santo Daime's doctrine works is simple: the religion is open to anyone who shows interest. So one day last fall I wrote to Goldman and asked if I could come to Ashland and observe the church's members doing whatever it is they do. It was weeks before I heard back. Goldman informed me that he would be open to a story, but under one condition: I had to attend a church service, which he called a "work." And not as an observer. As a participant.

He instructed me to set up an interview with someone named John Seligman, a fellow Daime expert and the chief screener of new church applicants.

Seligman sent me a Goldman-penned introduction to the Daime, a blank medical waiver and a note scheduling my interview for early January. I read the airy introduction, scratched my head and called Goldman for some basic background. He said the work would involve a kind of dancing that puts participants in a trance state of "active meditation." Add in the Daime Tea, which he called a "super-powerful, altering, natural substance," and you've got a shortcut—a very intense, demanding shortcut—to profound spiritual vision.

"What the Daime offers is a direct experience that is only reserved for mystics," Goldman said.

That sounded alright, but I wanted some objective information on the strange psychedelic brew I was about to swallow. Not surprisingly, dredging up coherent accounts about ayahuasca isn't easy. And, as with most substances of its ilk, user experience varies wildly from person to person.

Take *The Yage Letters*, for instance, a tortuous, fragmented tale about Burroughs' and Ginsberg's frustrating quests for the drink in South and Central America. Ginsberg wrote of a pleasant (if bizarre) first ayahuasca experience, where he peered "at a mystery" through a "big black hole of God-Nose." His next trip, however, was all vomiting and horrifying snake hallucinations. "I was frightened," he complained, "and simply lay there with wave after wave of death-fear rolling over me till I could hardly stand it." And his final summation of ayahuasca doesn't quite read like a ringing endorsement: "I am afraid of some real madness, a Changed Universe permanently changed."

By the time January came around, I had decided the short version was twofold: the Daime would be very intense and demanding yet simple and beautiful. And I might puke my guts out. So I headed north through the flatlands and into the mountains on Interstate 5. The sun shone through the thickly misty sky like an incandescent silver dollar, and I wondered if I might soon be tripping with the angels, talking to God and driving back home as a mystic.

My orientation was set for the morning of the work. It was a damp, snowy Saturday when I arrived at the church's headquarters, a nondescript, street-level office space at the end of a short commercial strip.

I knocked on a door marked with a Star of David festooned with birds and circles and a glowing, double-beamed cross in the center. Seligman appeared and beckoned me in, instructing me to take off my shoes. He looked a little disheveled, sporting ragged, paint-splattered pants and a day or two of stubble on his face, with eyebrows like miniature scouring pads and a chunk of gray tufts protruding from either side of his head. Other than the strangeness of his eerie calm and a clear, steady look in his eye—qualities I later noticed were present in all the Daimestas I would meet—he struck me as a pretty benign guy.

“Welcome, Alex,” he said.

We shook hands and sat down on folding chairs at an altar shaped like a six-pointed star. A certain degree of anonymity is important to the Daimestas, so rather than engaging me in a lot of small talk, Seligman merely closed his eyes. We sat for a few minutes in silent meditation. Then, Seligman opened his heavy-lidded eyes and in a half-whispered tone declared the room we were sitting in a “sacred space.”

In a slow, considered way, Seligman began by explaining the basics. This particular work would be an important one, a celebration of Three Kings Day, which sounded familiar to me from having grown up Catholic (although all I remembered was that it had something to do with Christmas). For this work, we’d be singing the entirety of a 128-song hymnbook in Portuguese and dancing for up to 12 hours. And every two hours, we’d be drinking another swig of Daim Tea. Once the work started, Seligman said, what I could expect and what would be expected of me would include the following: maintaining vibrational cohesiveness and harmony through music and dancing... holding the current... creating a bridge... allowing celestial energies to come down through the altar metaphorically *and* actually... and holding a sacred communion both private and communal with divine guides.

What the hell was this man talking about?

Seligman's soothing voice and nebulous syntax only amplified my anxiety. I was starting to feel pretty awkward. As his exposition on something about divine entities ground to a halt, I was thinking about weaseling out. Maybe I could fail the interview.

“Having strangers come in—it doesn't distract from the energy, the current, at all?” I asked in a loud, abrupt voice.

Seligman smiled calmly and watched me squirm. I wasn't getting away that easily.

“There are no visitors,” he said. “Everybody's a participant.” He explained to me that all are

guaranteed a protective and nurturing environment, a container to process the unpredictable and often demanding revelations brought forth by drinking Daimon Tea. The container provides the proper setting, as I imagined Timothy Leary might put it, for the revelations, which may send me on a brutal ride through latent emotional traumas and truths.

“Throwing up may be part of that,” Seligman said. “What we allow—this container that we create—is to process it. There's an invitation. It's not expected of you, but if it comes up, we are holding space for you to move through that. We invite you to cry. We are there to help.”

Really? I was about to spend twelve hours in the divine container with a bunch of caterwauling strangers, feet sore, sobbing, puking, and high on DMT the whole time?

“About the tea,” I said, trying to maintain a tone of composure. “What if it's not working out for me and I'm having a bad time of it after the first drink? Could I skip the next go-round?”

“The answer is yes,” Seligman replied. “But the answer is also no.” It would all be up to the divine guides. “If you feel like you're gonna die,” he assured me, “sit back down, close your eyes and breathe.”

To stall the onset of total panic, I focused on picking out and memorizing the practical rules Seligman was laying out. If I wanted to get out of the dancing line and go sit down or vomit, I should do so only between hymns. If I wanted to go outside and “take a leak or commune with a tree,” I had to let a guardian at the door know about it. I was not to cross my arms or legs at any time during the work. And I had to dress in all white. That sounded eerily cultish to me.

I looked down at my unwashed, cream-colored jeans.

“These alright?” I asked.

Seligman scoffed and shook his head. “They're dirty. It's important that you be clean.” He grabbed a pencil and drew me a map to the local paint store, where I could get a nice, crisp, brilliantly colorless pair of painter's pants—ones pleasing to the divine guides, who might otherwise be bummed if I didn't show up looking as pure as a virgin bride on her wedding day.

He handed me the map and a packet with more rules, guidelines and a massive list of drugs, medications and foods to avoid. I sat down at a desk and for the second time filled out the medical waiver, a three-page affair that I had of course forgotten to bring with me. I was not taking any antidepressants. Check. Never been hospitalized for psychological problems. Check. “Is there anything else about your physical or emotional status of which we should be made aware?” I guess not.

I signed my name at the bottom of the last page, indemnifying the church from any nausea, diarrhea or “mental changes” I might suffer as a result of the work, and I promised to take full personal responsibility for “whatever may occur, anticipated or unanticipated.”

And with that, my orientation was complete.

“I'm very glad you came,” Seligman said. He stuck my papers into a file and sent me out the door.

Later that day, I met my sponsor, Maleko Dawnchild, at his ex-girlfriend's parents' house, where he was living temporarily. It was a comfortable, normal suburban two-story on an Ashland cul-de-sac. Dawnchild answered the door shirtless and in loose-fitting pajama pants. I had caught him in the middle of a stretching session.

“This is gonna be a good work,” he said, wide-eyed and smiling.

As Dawnchild limbered up on a yoga mat in the middle of the living room, he told me about how he first discovered the Daime in Hawaii—he went there after tiring of his hard-partying life as a model in Los Angeles. Then he got up and ran to the kitchen, where he slammed a kale smoothie. He sprinted upstairs to change and descended in a snappy white suit with a gold star pinned on the lapel. We were ready for the work.

Dawnchild and I drove about 10 miles outside of town and navigated a winding, unpaved path through the wilderness until we finally made it to our destination. It was Goldman's hillside property, on which he had built a *salão*, a round, domed building where the church's works are held. It was nestled in the woods right behind Goldman's house. Men in white suits and black ties emerged from cars with women wearing tiara-like crowns and long, white dresses with green strips of fabric that formed a “y” across their chests. They looked like girl scouts. People of all ages kept arriving, hugging each other and saying hello, until the *salão* was almost full, with almost 60 white-clad worshipers crammed into the building. Then all of us lined up three rows deep around an altar just like the one in Seligman's office, men on one side and women on the other.

Goldman arrived to begin the service with armloads of Daime Tea in big jugs. We said a couple Hail Marys and Our Fathers. Then, just as I had every week for years when I was a Catholic schoolboy, I got in line for the sacrament. Except this time, it wasn't the communion wafer and sip of wine I was waiting for. It was Daime Tea. As I watched Daimestas who were in line in front of me walk past with empty double-shot-sized glasses and scrunched-up faces, I desperately forced thoughts of Jonestown out of my mind.

It was my turn.

I approached the guardian, who was holding a glass at eye level and gazing at the mahogany broth inside. He offered it to me. I took the glass, closed my eyes and gulped down the tea. It was thick and boasted major overtones of chewing tobacco, licorice, Listerine and dirt.

I felt a mild wave of calm—but that was it. Everyone returned to formation around the altar, and thus began the work. We opened our hymnbooks and started to sing the *hinarios*, hymns written by Afro-Portuguese rubber plantation worker Raimundo Irineu Serra, who founded Santo Daime

in the 1930s. The songs were about God, heartbreak and happiness. Men with shakers kept the rhythm. Everyone sang, and I mumbled and stepped on my feet in the back row until I finally picked up on it, shuffling three steps to the left, pivoting, and shuffling three steps to the right. This went on for a good hour and a half, with pauses between songs during which Goldman would incant various thanksgivings (“Viva Santo Daime!”). The whole crowd would respond with a hearty “Viva!” Then it was time to drink tea again.

Seligman was distributing the stuff this time, and he looked like a new man—cleaned up, freshly shaven and impressive in his crispy whites. He handed me the glass.

“You startin’ to feel it yet?” he asked me, winking.

I nodded and downed the bitter brew. This seemed to be the effective dose, the one that really put us “in the power,” as the Daimistas say—I would just say it got us fucked up. A few people got out of the dancing line to sit down and puke into plastic bowls, while guardians stood watch and cleaned up after them. Dawnchild, my sponsor, made shooing sounds, swayed like a gymnast warming up for floor exercises and snatched invisible flies out of the air. One woman sat on the floor with a sheet over her head and began to cry, and another went outside to wail and run around in the darkness. Goldman, reminiscent of Bill Murray in one of his younger, more charismatic roles, listed from side to side and bellowed out the hymns just a bit louder than anyone else.

I looked up at the streamers and tinsel that stretched from the skylight at the top of the *salão* to the edges of the walls, and half the ceiling began to overlap with the other. I could feel the loud resonance of the acapella hymns, and I marveled at this whole room full of people moving in unison. It was at this point that I understood the appeal of this religion: it is primal rather than modern. It follows no dogma, nor does it promote proselytizing. It's based on simplicity, rhythm and synchronicity—just add drugs and music. The tea is basically fuel to keep people focused on singing and dancing as the primary activity, but they're also allowed to remove themselves for moments of personal therapy and expression while guardians keep an eye on them to ensure their safety.

I glanced at the hymnbook in my hand and noticed that we were only about a quarter of the way through it, and I had one more realization: Santo Daime requires the sort of discipline that your average recreational drug enthusiast or thrill-seeker simply wouldn't have the patience to stick with. They don't call it a “work” for nothing.

Jonathan Goldman is proud of what he's created.

“I knew we would be involved in creating a legal sanction for the Daime to operate in the U.S.,” he says. “We planned it from the beginning.”

It's the afternoon after the work, and Goldman is at home in a state of relaxed glory. Surrounded by countless indoor plants and an exhaustive array of icons from most major world religions, he

reclines on a leather couch facing a massive picture window that frames a killer view of the Siskiyou Mountains. Padrinho Goldman considers himself a representative of the Daime (“the masters of the astral,” he calls it), not to mention a shaman, a healer and a master of ceremonies. He says that when he established the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen in Ashland in 1993, he had a feeling he was going to “liberate the Daime.”

What Goldman didn't plan was what happened in 1999, when he received a shipment of Daime Tea that had been traced by federal authorities. When the tea arrived, so did Ashland police. They held guns on his family, ransacked his house and took him to jail.

Goldman fought back, hiring a team of lawyers to sue the U.S. Department of Justice under President George W. Bush. The ten-year legal battle culminated in a March 2009 ruling by U.S. District Judge Owen Panner, who found that the government had indeed overreacted, substantially burdening the church's sincere exercise of its religion, and that the Department of Justice had failed to prove that the Controlled Substances Act should apply to these harmless, if somewhat out-there, Diamestas. And almost as if to fulfill the Padrinho's prophesy, Panner gave the church a pass under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It was an exceptionally rare exemption granted also to Native Americans for their use of peyote and more recently upheld (with some restrictions) by the U.S. Supreme Court for New Mexico's União do Vegetal (UDV), another Brazil-based, ayahuasca-sipping sect.

The DEA's people aren't happy about Judge Panner's ruling, and the department is scrutinizing the church yet again. Goldman says the officials he's been dealing with don't think any district court judge has the power to grant exemptions to anyone for schedule-I substances. DEA Associate Chief Council Karen Richardson refused to comment on “ongoing litigation,” but she confirmed in a letter that the department has indeed appealed Panner's decision in the Ninth Circuit Court.

And a call to DEA spokesman Chris Jakim yielded little more than proof that Jakim knows how to do his job—the only information he'd offer in regards to the church specifically or ayahuasca in general was a reiteration of the DEA's party-line on schedule-I drugs. He said that DMT is not accepted for use by anyone in the medical field and that there's a high risk in the use of ayahuasca as medicine, as it's not done under professional supervision.

In a way, Jakim has a point: The Diamestas aren't a bunch of doctors or psychiatrists. And for a lot of people, drinking ayahuasca is a psychotherapeutic procedure done in an attempt to heal some very serious psychic wounds.

In fact, that was the context through which Goldman himself first discovered Daime Tea at the end of 1987; never a particularly spiritual man, he had been struggling for years with issues of guilt, self-hatred and repression, he says. Nothing was really working. He was miserable. His heart, he says, was a “stone peach pit.” Then Goldman's psychotherapist took him and a group of former clients to Brazil.

“He told me that if I went,” Goldman says, “I'd have the equivalent of ten years of psychotherapy and ten years of meditation in one month by drinking this weird tea. I was like, 'Good deal. Let's

go.”

Did it work? “Without Daime I'd be dead,” Goldman says, “and if not dead, I'd be miserable, sick, neurotic, crazy, divorced, alone...” He trails off before telling of his first psychoactive-aided healing.

“We were dancing and singing all night,” he says, “and I felt so sick and nauseous the whole time. Because of all this repression I had, I had so much to clean. And I was really arrogant and I was really controlling and I was slippery and I was smart so I could avoid the really deep stuff in me—and the Daime didn't allow any of that. It was the first force I met that was smarter, quicker, way more knowledgeable and way more wise than I was. So I was impressed.”

It is that very impressive promise of spiritual deep-cleaning that brings many to the fold. A number of Daimistas claim to have cured—or at least greatly alleviated—their addictions and neuroses by drinking Daime Tea, sometimes after only one session. And while the little medical research that's been done on ayahuasca drinkers seems to support their claims, the Daimistas at the church have no real way of knowing whether or not their inductees will benefit from the stuff or be driven mad by it; they rely largely on the honor system to drum out anyone for whom ayahuasca would be “inappropriate.”

“Their screenings are relatively superficial,” UCLA Professor of Psychiatry Dr. Charles M. Grob says of Santo Daime. “These churches are not that thorough.”

In 1996, Grob studied Brazilian followers of UDV, whose adherents call ayahuasca “hoasca.” In his report, “Human Psychopharmacology of Hoasca,” he concludes that for members who had entered the UDV with issues ranging from alcoholism to depression, all disorders had indeed remitted without recurrence. Churchgoers were emphatic that they had undergone radical transformations of behavior and attitudes and that they were able to use ayahuasca to “eliminate their chronic anger, resentment, aggression and alienation,” according to the report. But only in the proper context, and only for the right people.

“With ayahuasca,” Grob says, “you have a powerful means by which to achieve a transpersonal experience. But only if you do adequate screening and control conditions.”

Driving out to the woods to do something akin to an acid test in an attempt to overcome serious psychological troubles may be a dicey proposition. For instance, Grob says, if an ayahuasca neophyte has a latent, unknown family history of schizophrenia, he or she may have an “untoward reaction” to the DMT. That could mean anything from intense hallucinations to outright psychotic breaks. And if any aspiring Daimistas are less than forthcoming during the interview and don't disclose to Seligman that they're taking antidepressants, after quaffing the tea they may find themselves suffering from serotonin syndrome. That happens when the monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI), the other active ingredient in the ayahuasca, interacts with the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) component of the depression medication. Serotonin syndrome can lead to tremors, high fever and even death. “It's a medical crisis when it occurs,” Grob says.

These possibilities are ostensibly what's keeping the DEA sniffing around the church. But Goldman remains confident that the church's screening process and its guardian system provide the essential safeguards to ensure that a good time is had by all. He has a feeling the Daimistas will emerge victorious against any appeals. After all, there seems to be a demand for what he's offering.

“Things have changed a lot,” Goldman says of the time since the ruling. “Operating freely is a big deal, and our mission is starting to grow.” Last year's 12-hour Three Kings Day work had drawn only about 30 worshipers. This year, Goldman says, the number had more than doubled.

As for my own spiritual experience with DMT—it was alright. I may not have gotten lasting satisfaction or fulfillment from my first time drinking Daim Tea. I didn't throw up, see snakes or have a conversation with Christ. But I certainly enjoyed myself in the moment. I also gained an understanding of how spirituality can coexist in a very simple way with what is for all intents and purposes an intoxicant, and how that sensation can be so meaningful for so many people.

Unless the DEA gets its way, more curious seekers like me will continue to make the pilgrimage to Goldman's church for a completely unique spiritual experience—and the Daimistas will be shouting “Viva!” with open arms for years to come.