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*To the memory of
Walter Pahnke,
and to his wife, Eva,
and their children, Kristin, David, and Jonathan*

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HUSTON SMITH

CLEANSING
the DOORS *of*
PERCEPTION

The Religious Significance of
Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals

I turn now to the testimonials of members of the Native American Church, preceding them with the two opening paragraphs of the Preface that I wrote for the book from which the testimonials are drawn.

In a place apart, closer to nature than to the human scene, a tepee throws its outline against the night sky, a sacred silhouette. Inside, thirty or so Indians, men and women, sit on blankets and mats around a fire. Several children are sleeping in their parents' laps or on the ground by their sides. A seven-stone water drum pounds loudly and rapidly – the fetal heartbeat raised to cosmic proportions. Songs are sung with piercing intensity, interspersed with prayers and confessions. Tears flow, and a sacrament is ingested. It is a congregation of the Native American Church in one of its appointed meetings.

The Native American Church is the spiritual bulwark of an estimated quarter-million of the original inhabitants of this continent. Its roots extend into the twilight zone of prehistory, before the rise of Christianity or any of the historical religions.

[The testimonials that now unfold begin with one by Reuben Snake, who co-edited the book from which they are drawn.]

I am a Hochunk or Winnebago, and the Native American Church has been the center of my adult life. Everything we do in our Church is to honor the Creator and find our place in his creation. We try to respect and honor our families and friends; we try to have compassion for our fellow men, for that's what our Creator tells us to do. This attitude comes to us through a sacred herb, one that is sacred because it is, in fact, divine. We call it Peyote, but more often, because of what it does for us, we call it our Medicine. It is the most powerful of all the plants, because God endowed it with his love and compassion. He put those qualities into this lowly herb so that when we eat it we can feel that the love that God is – I emphasize the love that God is, not that God *has* – is physically inside us. From there it overflows in compassion for human beings and all other kinds of creatures. It enables us to treat one another tenderly, and with joy, love, and respect.

[I continue with the remaining testimonials I have selected, arranged according to the aspect of peyote that each addresses most directly.]

The Medicine

We can't explain our religion. To understand it you have to eat its Medicine.

—Anonymous

Our favorite term for Peyote is Medicine. To us it is a portion of the body of Christ, even as the communion bread is believed to be a portion of Christ's body for Christians.

In the Bible, Christ spoke of a comforter who was to come. Sent by God, this comforter came to the Indians in the form of this holy Medicine. We know whereof we speak. We have tasted of God and our eyes have been opened.

It is utter folly for scientists to attempt to analyze this Medicine. Can science analyze God's body? It is a part of God's body, and God's Holy Spirit envelops it. It cures us of our temporal ills, as well as ills of a spiritual nature. It takes away the desire for strong drink. I myself have been cured of a loathsome disease too horrible to mention. So have hundreds of others. Hundreds of confirmed drunkards have been rescued from their downward ways.

—Albert Hensley, Winnebago

I'll be ninety-four on my next birthday, so if there's an example of someone who's been using Peyote all his life, I guess I am he. I feel that I would die for this Medicine, it has meant so much to my life. My people use it and find spiritual guidance. When I sit in the tepee and partake of the Medicine, I concentrate and think. I think of how I want to be blessed and who I want to pray for. The outside world disappears. I feel humble, and the good thoughts that come to me help me.

—Truman Dailey, Otoe-Missouri

I have never seen colors or experienced delusions of any sort while taking Peyote. What it feels like is that I am sitting

right by God the Creator. I communicate with him. Of course he isn't there physically, but spiritually I sense that he is near me. And whatever I pray for, I feel that he hears me. Other than that special sense of closeness, the experience isn't remarkable.

Part of the experience of being close to God is that the Medicine gets bad stuff out of you. If you have evil thoughts or are in a poor frame of mind generally, you are going to see all that clearly. In this way, if you're not living your life well, Peyote purifies you. It helps clean your spirit. I have heard many testimonials of gratitude to the Creator and prayers for forgiveness.

—Patricia Mousetail Russell,
Southern Cheyenne

The Medicine is the main thing of all. It's our life. Nothing else can accomplish much without the herb the Creator gave us.

—A Washoe

Peyote is power. A tremendous power pervades the tepee during a meeting. It will take all your lifetime to know only a small part of the power that is there.

—Similar statements by a Navajo and
Crow, here interwoven

In the first creation God himself used to talk to people and tell them what to do. Long after, Christ came among the white people and told them what to do. Then God gave us Indians Peyote. That's how we found God.

—A Kiowa

Peyote goes all over my body – I feel it, its workings. My mind is clear. Before I didn't think much about what's right, but with Peyote I know it's God working, the God who gave it to us. I feel good because God is going to take care of me. I have nothing to worry about, nothing to be afraid of because the Almighty is at work.

—Dewey Neconish, Menomini

Reverence, Humility, Awe, and Love

There are certain times in a meeting when you can feel a presence. It's a holy feeling, the presence of the spirit of God that's in the midst of these people. It makes you want to pray deep in your heart.

—A Menomini man in his forties

Last week we admitted a newspaperwoman who wanted to find out about the Native American Church. When she came out of the tepee in the morning she told us how humble she felt. That's true of us too. Our Holy Sacrament, Peyote, teaches us humility.

—Paris Williams, Ponca

That night I realized that in all the years that I had lived on earth I had never known anything holy. Now, for the first time, I knew something holy.

—John Rave, Winnebago, after his
first Peyote meeting

I'm glad I joined the Native American Church and used the Medicine, since it makes me think about the Almighty and how far away I have gotten from him.

—Beatrice Weasel Bear

Sometimes I am sitting here at home all alone, but I am not alone. I have my drum, water, and a gourd. I sing the songs of my church and my worries are gone. I feel good again, and refreshed. Peyote is not like a narcotic. When you eat it, your mind turns to the Great Spirit.

—Bernard Ice, a blind Oglala Lakota

Peyote to me is my Bible. I know what I should be doing and shouldn't be doing. When I take that Peyote, I feel humble and respectful all the time.

—Larry Etsitty, Navajo

This Medicine's got hope in it. It's got faith in it. It's got love in it. And it's got charity in it. So fill up all the fireplaces. Fill them up with those four words.

—Willie Riggs, Sr., Navajo Roadman

Moral Impact

This Peyote has done me a world of good. It put me on the right road. It has caused me to put aside all intoxicating liquor. I now have no desire for whiskey, beer, or any strong drink. I have no desire for tobacco. If I keep on using this Peyote, I'm going to be an upright man toward God.

—A Menomini

When I started eating that Medicine it told me something. I found out I was a sinner. Then I commenced to think why I was like that. I ate some more, and I found out that Peyote teaches me what is right. From then on I've tried to behave myself.

—A Menomini

Chief Peyote tells us that our meetings are to make Indians good, to make them friends, and to make them stop fighting. When we eat Peyote we feel towards others a warm glow in our hearts as if they were our brothers.

—Ralph Kochampanaskin

This is all that I know. When I started eating this Medicine I began to see everything. I no longer quarreled with anyone. I no longer was angry with anyone. That's it. When I started to eat this Medicine I began to think of the Great Spirit always, every day.

—A Menomini woman in her seventies

Petition, Prayer, Thanksgiving, and Guidance

Well Great Spirit, the time has now come. I am going to pray to you where I am standing. Please let everything be abundant,

so that we may exist well on this earth where we live. We thank you, Great Spirit above, for allowing us to live up to the present. We pray you to give strength to every one of us. Hold the hands of each one of my children. Give them strength. Give them that which is good in the future, and make them stand erect here on earth where we live.

—An anonymous Menomini

Great Spirit who is all, I am going to give you thanks now. And now I am telling you in advance that we have all come here to this house, which you gave us, to pray to be purified. Now we are going to enter to pray to you all night. These, my brothers and sisters, will pray to you. Please keep carefully in mind whatever they will ask of you. Also, my relatives have come to visit us. They are going to pray to you for whatever is in their thoughts. So in advance we are telling you, here, that we are going to enter this house which you have given us to pray to you.

—Thomas Wayka, Menomini

Healing

I am ninety-six years old now, and when people ask me how long I have been taking this Medicine I say since before I was born. I say that because my mother took some Peyote the night before she delivered me. First she offered a prayer, and then she swallowed the Medicine. I was born about noon the following day, and as soon as she could get up and around, the first thing she did was make some Medicine tea and give me some of it. To understand all this you need to know that I wasn't her first child. There had been two boys before me, but neither of them survived. My mother wanted to be sure that I would make it, and that's why she took the Medicine at the time of my delivery and gave me some as soon as she was able.

To help you understand her great faith in our Medicine I have to go back four or five years. About three years before she gave birth to me she got so she couldn't walk, and to explain what happened then I need to go back still farther and tell you about her upbringing.

Her mother – my grandmother – was an orphan who was brought up in a Christian way and raised my mother that way. But when she was of marriageable age she went to visit the nearby Otoe tribe. One of the boys there liked her and they got married. The family she married into was one hundred percent Indian, but her upbringing had been Christian. Then a strange malady beset her. The doctors never did understand what it was, but she became crippled. She couldn't walk. With her Christian upbringing she prayed as hard as she could to Jesus, but she kept getting worse.

Then something happened that turned out to be important. Her family was on its way to a tribal meeting of some sort and the house where they stopped to spend the night had a tepee behind it – there was going to be a Peyote meeting that night. That was the first Peyote meeting my mother had ever attended. Around midnight a bucket of water was passed around and she drank some. That water hadn't touched the ground because it had been collected in pans that people had put out to catch rain. After they drank the water they started to sing, and then they offered my mother the Medicine. They told her that if she took the Medicine and prayed with all the faith she could manage, it might help her. She consumed it, prayed, and when the meeting was over she began to get well. Within a month she was walking.

I don't know, of course, but it seems like her faith was equally strong when she was a Christian, but when she got on the Indian side of religion and took the Medicine, it seems like that's what made the difference and enabled her to walk again.

—Truman Dailey

Two years ago I fell ill. It was scary because I seemed to have a blood disorder. The doctors were talking about sending me to Minnesota to have me treated for leukemia.

Four days before my birthday my parents put on a prayer service for me. They rolled the sacred tobacco, gave me Medicine, fanned me with the waterbird fan, and prayed for me. Four days later I went to the hospital. My blood count was normal and I gained back the weight I had lost.

I think too of the miracle that happened to my Grandpa

Philip from whom I get my middle name, Afraid-of-Bear. Once when he was home on leave from the service there was a prayer ceremony for a young man who was desperately ill. Grandpa was the Fireman at this meeting and Peyote was placed in the center of the room so everybody could eat as much as they wanted. In ceremonies that are specifically for healing, people ingest as much as they can, and more, to increase the Medicine's power.

As the evening wore on, it seemed clear that the young man was dying. So when midnight arrived and it was time for Grandpa to pray officially as Fireman, he asked the creator to take his goodness, his wholesomeness and his strength, and give them to the younger, dying man. He said he would be willing to lay down his remaining years for the man, who had not experienced as much of life as he had.

The young man survived his crisis and did pull through. But Grandpa! The next day, while chasing horses, he keeled over with a heart attack. That was sad, but it happened the way he wanted it to. Peyote listened to him, and granted what he asked.

—Loretta Afraid-of-Bear Cook, Lakota

New Life and Behavior Change

I started using Peyote when I came back from the army in 1962. I stopped using liquor because it is not right to use it with the Medicine. I told all these people when they came to my meeting, you guys better straighten up. This liquor doesn't go with Medicine. White people say liquor and gas don't go together and it's the same with Medicine. Liquor and Medicine don't go together.

—Irvine Tachonie, Navajo

It's been twenty-three years that I've lived a life of sobriety. I don't smoke cigarettes like I used to. I don't drink alcohol or use any kind of drugs because of the life that I now live in the Native American Church. That's what it's done for me, for my family and my relatives on both sides: my Winnebago in-laws,

my Sioux relatives, my Menomini relatives, my Creek and Seminole and Ottawa and Iowa, my people back home in Oklahoma.

—Johnny White Cloud, Otoe-Missouri/Creek/Seminole

I'm into my sixth year of recovery from alcoholism. I'm off the bottle now, but the temptation is still there. When I go to Peyote I pray God to forgive my old alcoholism and to keep me sober.

Over the years Peyote has taught me many things, though actually it is God who taught them to me through Peyote.

—Andy Kozad, Kiowa

When I first used Peyote I became deathly sick. It seemed like I vomited several bottles of whiskey, several plugs of tobacco, and two bulldogs. This accumulation of filth represented all the sins I had ever committed. With its expulsion I became pure and clean in the sight of God, and I knew that by the continued use of Peyote I would remain in that condition. I was transformed — a new man.

—A Winnebago

My heart was filled with murderous thoughts when I first took Peyote. I wanted to kill my brother and sister. All my thoughts were fixed on the warpath. Some evil spirit possessed me. I even desired to kill myself.

Then I ate this Medicine and everything changed. I became deeply attached to the brother and sister whom I had wanted to kill. This the Medicine accomplished for me.

—John Rave

Women and the Feminine

A long time ago one of my aunts, Ethel Blackbird, told me that Peyote can be used for many kinds of healings and that we should take it when we have our babies.

When it came time for me to do the woman's ritual of having my first child, my mother came from Washington State where she had been living. My labor pains started around four in the morning and she immediately got up and gave me some Medicine. This pulled my resources back inside of me and kept me calm. Being calm enabled me to experience the birthing process clearly and calmly, consciously sensing and feeling what was going on.

—Loretta Afraid-of-Bear Cook

Bereavement and Death

Many people have gone on the path of this life and beyond. Our altar, which is in the shape of a mound, is Mother Earth where you come from and where you return. It is the same as the biblical passage, "from dust to dust." As you eat Peyote, the altar becomes a grave into which many a man has gone.

—Lawrence Hunter, Minneconjou Lakota

My grandmother wanted her Last Sacraments. They were going to call a minister, but she said she wanted them in the Peyote way. William Black Bear gave her four Peyote balls, and my father sang four songs. They said the Lord's Prayer, and she said Amen and breathed her last breath.

—Eva Gap, Oglala Lakota