

Connections and Possibilities

A Project New Day Interview

with

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By Alexandra Peterson

PND: Hello Mary, thank you for taking the time to talk with us again. As many people know, you have personally guided over 500 study sessions at the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research. Your experience there has given you a wealth of knowledge about the therapeutic benefits of psilocybin-assisted therapy. We at Project New Day are grateful that you are taking the time to share some of the insights you have gained from your more than two decades of experience.

Mary: Thank you. When I learned about your program, I felt it was very much in alignment with what I believe and what is important to me. Central to that is how you have compassion and caring for human suffering at its core. I think yours is an excellent model and I like how it emphasizes connection through coaching, clinical psychedelic therapy, and the community weekly zoom sessions. And, of course, your vision of making the model of your program scalable and globally available without charge.

PND: We really do want to help. From our own experience, and from what we have learned from you so far, our healing philosophy is primarily about improving connections and possibilities.

In your article titled, “My Experience as a Guide in the Johns Hopkins Psilocybin Research Project,” you say,

In order to relax, a safe and trusting environment is necessary. Ideally, our preparation meetings have provided that, thus enabling participants to relax into a deeper and more expansive experience. This expansiveness often leads to a deep sense of love and connection for self and all; both this expansiveness and this sense of connection are recurrent themes in psilocybin experiences.

You wrote that article in 2014. Do you feel the same way today?

Mary: Yes, we continue to provide that safe and trusting environment. Just this past week I was working with a participant who had a powerful session. At the end of the day, they said, “I am healed! I am a new person now!” In our meeting the next day we discuss their session experience and the importance of integrating that into their daily life. Integration is about creating a new story. Who are you now? What do you want? If you keep telling the old one, you will just continue your old way of living.

PND: That’s such an incredible experience. It’s so impactful to hear just how deeply people are changed through these sessions. You mentioned integration; can you expand on what that is and how it allows people to strengthen their sense of connection?

Mary: Yes. We talk about their session experiences and that integration is the process of connecting with them, of embodying them. It's not about getting rid of them. It's saying "It's a part of me and it's made me who I am today and I have compassion and I thank you and I honor you." That's why the psychedelic aspect of these sessions is so different. They're really embodying the experience, living it, and moving through it. This experience that I'm describing brings a quote to mind, "Knowledge is a rumor until it's lived in the body, until it's lived in the muscles." And that really speaks to it. You can hear, you can read, and you can study, but to bring about change, you must take it down a level, you must embody it.

PND: It's so interesting to hear the concept of connection framed in the way you just described. Typically, when I consider the concept of connection, I immediately go to outward connection. Connections to the people around us and our environments, but that internal connection seems to be where it all starts. Would you mind sharing some of your thoughts on those external connections, and how, perhaps, we begin to cut ourselves off from them?

Mary: When I was first reading and contemplating this concept, how we strengthen our connections to others, I listened to a Ted Talk by Dr. Brene Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability". In a nutshell, she says, "Connection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. The way to connect is by breaking down the walls and by being vulnerable." The issue is, we don't do that. The very thing that's going to connect us, being vulnerable and sharing our true selves is what we're afraid of. We're afraid that if we are vulnerable, that when we do open ourselves up, we're not going to be accepted and this fear prevents us from connecting.

PND: How would you suggest we overcome those fears? How do we allow ourselves to open up and connect?

Mary: We build these walls and barriers and the more stuff we have, the more traumas, the more difficulties, and the less we've worked on them over the years, the stronger those walls are. They have to be removed, and that's the journey. That's all of our journeys. What we find underneath all of that, when we remove all those walls that are not our truth, is our true self. And our true self is love and love is connection. Connection to ourselves, to each other, and to everything. Spending time with people that I feel so at ease with, so connected to, and most of all not judged by, is where I remembered this truth. There are no expectations, and to me that is love, that is who we are, that is our true nature. It's there in all of us and some just have more blocks. But that's the journey. We're here together to help each other remove those barriers by giving our nonjudgmental presence, which is love.

PND: The way you speak about human nature and our desire to build connection both within ourselves and with the people around us is so inspiring. When did you begin to develop an interest in this specific area? Have you always been very aware of these concepts or has it developed over time?

Mary: When I took the job at John Hopkins, I didn't know anything about the therapeutic value of psychedelics but I did know the truth about love as our true nature. But 11 years in, and after running hundreds of study sessions, I realized most of what was being brought forward was the science and statistics. It was during our fifth study on spiritual practices, when I was taking assessments and psychological intakes, people were saying "I'm atheist, I'm agnostic. It's hard for me to answer these questions about God, even the God of your understanding is difficult." At that point, I was like, "Yes, it is so much bigger. What's happening in the psychedelic experiences is so much bigger." So, I knew I

needed to write about it. But figuring out where to begin was difficult, and as I sat with that, I remembered what Ernest Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* about overcoming writer's block. "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know." So, I closed my eyes, went inward, and thought "What's my true sentence?" And what came to me wasn't a sentence but a single word, "Love." Then I thought, "Okay, Mary, what does that mean? You know that's a broad word, what does that mean when you say it?" and then came the word "connection." Connection to myself, connection to each other, and connection to everything. I realized that was what participants were often experiencing in their psilocybin sessions. And I felt a sense of beauty and joy in that moment!

PND: Listening to you speak on this, I think it's really going to help people understand the importance of developing these concepts within themselves to really commit to practices that can encourage that sort of growth within themselves. You have spoken a lot about the concept of developing connections, can you take these last few moments to expand on how these concepts allow us to see and undertake new possibilities?

Mary: Of course, possibility happens when we are able to integrate what was discovered in the session into our daily lives. What changes do you want to make? We must make new neural pathways. It is updating our old programs and replacing them with new ones. The questions become, "How are we going to put these new programs in?", "What are the ways we can do that?", and "How are we going to keep feeding that, learning that, and becoming that?" It's about setting intentions and goals. Attainable goals that are going to allow you to progress toward embodying what you experienced in your therapeutic session.

PND: It's really so beautiful to hear you speak on these concepts. It has been so enlightening. People say trying to describe the psychedelic experience is ineffable so it's really a privilege to sit down with you and listen to you put these ideas into words. I really appreciate it and as always it has been such a pleasure speaking with you.

Mary: Yes, well I appreciate that because there's nothing more important than bringing all of this forward.