**A Splash in the Ocean of Freedom:**

**The Liberation of the Holy Daime**

Wednesday, May 18, 1999. 2 AM. I’m sitting on a bed in a suburban house outside Washington, DC. Next to me is Alfredo Gregorio de Melo, the lineage holder and leader of our branch of the Santo Daime spiritual path. We are somehow in this room alone in this house filled with 50 people. I am still wearing the clothes that are traditional for men in the ceremony we have recently completed: blue slacks and white dress shirt. Padrinho Alfredo, as he is known, is wrapped in a towel. He’s waiting to take a shower. I somehow have made my way into his bedroom. It is an honor, an opportunity for me, and admittedly a little strange to be in that situation. We sit side by side, chatting in Portuguese about his upcoming trip to Europe and about the state of the Daime community that my wife, Jane, and I lead in southern Oregon. He is a brown-skinned man, what is called in Brasil a *caboclo*, born, raised, educated, and living in the heart of the Amazon Forest. He is a poet-prince, a troubadour traveling the world, calling people from 26 nations to their own healing and vibrational spiritual inquiry through the plant-spirit path of the Santo Daime. He does this by his immense heart, unfaltering faith, supreme intelligence, sublime music, and nature-forged perspective on life and spirit, I am a white, middle class, college educated North American professional healer and teacher, living in a much-reduced north American forest in southern Oregon. We are the same age, 49. We bridge the large cultural difference between our worlds, him learning about mine from his years of traveling the world, me by having learned to speak his language, dedicating my life to following the spiritual path we share as closely as possible, and traveling to Brasil on average twice a year since my introduction to the Daime on a mountaintop in rural Brasil in 1988. And we are joined in our mutual commitment to helping the people who are ready to receive the deep, challenging, beautiful ceremonial work passed down to us from his parents and their antecedents. He and I are part of the third generation of Daime leaders. (For a historical perspective, that is the equivalent of the year 90 AD in the Christian origin story. The first gospel that became part of the New Testament was written in about the year 90.) I have flown across the country, having done ceremonies with him and his team in California the week before. He is a unique and extraordinary man. I relish any opportunity to be at his side. I am happy to be talking with him about anything. It’s a rare opportunity, seemingly occurring randomly. We sit in this companionable arrangement for probably 15 minutes.

Then, without preamble, Padrinho Alfredo turns to me and starts telling me the story of his father, Padrinho Sebastião, being taken to jail in the early 1970’s because of the opinion of government officials in Rio Branco, Acre, Brasil that his use of the Daime in the ceremonies he was leading in his community was illegal. I was happy to be hearing a story of the early days of the path. My admiration for the courage and unshakeable faith of Padrinho Sebastião and his followers was augmented by Padrinho Alfredo sharing what seemed to me a random, but welcome, story.

48 hours later, I am sitting in a jail cell, wearing pink pajamas, thinking, “How did he know?”

**Some Background**

August 1993. I am in the community of Céu da Montanha about 4 hours south of Rio. It is where I began my relationship with the Daime 5 years previous. Now I am back with my mentor/teacher/friend José Rosa, assisting him in helping a group of Americans to step into the Daime world of extraordinary vibrational healing and authentic spiritual knowledge, and, even more importantly, their own inner world. The possibility has been discussed by José and the other leaders of the Daime present in the village, including Padrinho Alfredo, that I may be ready to take some Daime back to Oregon with me and start conducting ceremonies in my adopted hometown of Ashland. I am wavering. It is not the thought of smuggling the Daime itself, which is illegal to do. I have always looked at rules in general and laws in particular as suggestions to be considered rather than something to be obeyed just because. What daunts me is the clear knowledge of the responsibility and commitment that I intuitively know comes with planting a flag of Light, a beacon that will call to it people with many levels of need, of suffering, and of personality. And on top of that, doing it in reference to a spiritual path coming from a very foreign culture; using a sacrament that is powerful and opens many inner doors in people’s consciousness; and that is based in Christianity to boot. And how it will change my life and that of my family in ways unimagined. (After 30 years of doing exactly that, I can say with absolute certainty that to do such a thing one must, by definition, be at least a little crazy.)

One day, in the middle of the workshop, I am walking with José on the flowered path towards the small round, stucco and rock building used for healing ceremonies, called the Star House. We meet the leader of the community, another extraordinarily intelligent, deeply spiritual, inspirational man named Alex Polari. He says to me, José translating, “So, are you going to take Daime to the United States?” I say, “Alex, nobody is telling me anything.” Meaning, I haven’t had any messages, visions, communications from beyond-me consciousnesses, no higher guiding wisdom telling me what to do. Alex, in his droll way, says, “Oh, another one that wants to hear Gabriel’s trumpet.” I reply, “What’s wrong with that?” He says, “Nothing. It’s just that it doesn’t happen that way most of the time.” In other words, leaps of faith have often to be taken through heart-centered intuition without much information for the mind to grasp on to. As they say, “Them’s the rules.”

The next day I am standing in a room at the back of the community’s church building in front of Padrinho Alfredo, who is visiting from his home in the Amazon. I am flanked by José on one side and Alex on the other. They are blocking any escape route. Padrinho Alfredo agrees to let me carry Daime to Oregon, to begin what will become the first ongoing church outside of Brasil.

To deal with the fear of the materially thankless and ridiculously demanding commitment I was making, I made up a story that I had “received” that it was only for two years. Since I now know that my actual other-dimensional guides don’t lie, I now add that two-year message to a long and ongoing list of discernments between what is inspiration and what comes from ego. The human power of self-delusion is impressive. In this case, looking with hindsight, it was useful.

One piece of advice: if the message you “receive” conveniently matches what you want to hear, be suspicious of where it’s coming from.

That moment of near flipping-a-coin choice in that rural mountaintop church began what would be six years of smuggling Daime into the United States. We’d put liquid Daime, sometimes up to 40 liters, in our carry-on suitcases, pray like crazy on the flights from Brasil, access our faith and visualize the orientation that, as José Rosa said, you are bringing the baby Jesus through the check point into Egypt. He also told us that since we knew absolutely nothing about how to do the rituals, we should do them as closely as how they were done in Brasil as we could. Even these 30 years later, when we know what we’re doing, we still follow that imprimatur. We honor our roots and the people who hold those roots in the forest and in greater Brasil. We do that by how we conduct ourselves and by the practical help we give to the many communities with which we have heart and spiritual connection. And that honoring and linking with our antcedents gives us not only orientation, but energetic and spiritual protection.

The first rituals we did in Ashland were performed listening to many-timed copied cassette tapes of Daime hymns. To participate in our rituals, one had to have gone to Brasil and be introduced to the Daime there. It took courage, faith, and the clear knowledge that what we were doing was blessed, guided, and useful. We did not do it to raise a middle finger to the government. We did not do it for any kind of profit, power, or fame. We did it because our religion, our love, and our consciences demanded that we do so. And I can say that, personally, I loved that what we were doing was new, uncharted, and way outside the box.

Even in those early days, learning on the job, doing those first humble ceremonies with ten people, we somehow knew that someday we would be in front of a judge, affirming our rights as citizens of the United States to practice our religion without the boot of the government hovering over our necks. Almost from the first, we started keeping detailed records of our ceremonies, our Daime use, and what we did with the very small amount of money we took in.

It is a tricky thing to declare that you are following a “higher law”. All manner of acts- truly light-inspired and delusional- can be, and are often, given justification by that declaration. Referring to a higher law for permission to do what you want to do in any case, can insulate you from feedback and be an excuse to avoid self-examination. It can become the rationale for not following norms, legal, moral, and ethical. The legal part has a long-established track record. The ethical and moral hubris has one also. The question that is not asked enough is, where is your declared higher “law” coming from? There is not just one place or consciousness that inspiration comes from. Trickery is not limited to devious humans. That examination of one’s own motives and the discernment of what is true inspiration from Light-committed sources is best made ruthlessly. Who/what are you putting in charge of what you do, say invoke, create? Most particularly, for people who would put on a mantle of leadership, the temptations of ego are legion. It is possible to create an inner truth and bullshit assessment program. It takes time, honest feedback, letting go of pride, a modicum of humility, a commitment to something bigger and more important than yourself and mostly, a ruthless commitment to your actual grounded heart, wherein lies true, intuitive discernment.

The examples of a lack of introspective discernment are rife in many venues. Spiritual groups are especially vulnerable to charismatic, “inspired” leaders doing all manner of things in the name of inspiration to which only they have access, and therefore they cannot be questioned with any authority. (See any religion) Those who do question are most often branded heretics or worse, enemies of the truth. And desperate spiritual seekers can be vulnerable to following what they know on some deep level is wrong, hoping for comfort and relief from their pain; for someone to save them. I have certainly been occasionally accused of harboring and promoting such delusions. I have been fortunate to be involved in a spiritual path that, if one pays attention to the teachings of that path, and if you drink Daime according to those teachings, you will be brought to your knees multiple times (sometimes literally) by a spiritual power far greater than you, seeing nose-in-it your glories, your wounds, your projections, and your delusions. And then be given the chance for redemption through the literal universal force of forgiveness based in hard-won humility. You can then develop the discernment to know what is true inspiration coming from a higher source, what is your aggrandizing ego, and what is distorted, even slightly, by being projected through the veils of trauma. I have been blessed to be surrounded by people who themselves are committed to truthful transforming and are not impressed by self-promoting spiritual leaders declaring themselves the source of higher law. On our team guiding our little spiritual boat, we have questioned our sources of inspiration many, many times. Our goal has always been to contribute to the liberation of all beings; to add some clean water to the sea of freedom. That means cleaning ourselves of that which would distort the Light and make inspiration the servant of self-aggrandizement. That is an ongoing process.

What I can affirm after doing this plant medicine work for 30 years, is that we and the people who have come to us seeking healing and spiritual evolution, have deserved the blessing of the accelerated path and opening to miracles that the vibration of the sacred medicine can afford. We deserve to partake of the sacred tea as we feel called from an internal intuitive source. No consideration of mundane legality or vulnerability to government opinion should be part of that decision. That’s why we freed the Daime. True Light and spiritual knowledge cannot be rightly legislated by any government.

And so, from 1993 on, we had taken on the mission to bring the medicine from the forest to the suffering people of the United States. The fact that the government in its blindered ignorance had another opinion was not exactly irrelevant, but it was not of primary importance. We understood the risk we were taking, but we drew strength from the history of people from all ages and places who have defied government and religious opinion in the name of fundamental freedom of choice to worship as we were called to do by inspiration, intuition, conscience, and love. We were pathetically inept but sincere in keeping what we were doing “private”. We tried with some limited success to not speak about what we were doing in public places. The internet did not yet exist. That gave us 6 years to learn how to conduct our ceremonies and to organize our papers for what we knew from the beginning would be a confrontation with the government. We didn’t know when it would come, or exactly how it would be orchestrated. But we knew it would arrive.

**I want to tell you the story of the last time of the many that we brought Dame illegally into the country. That is what led to me sitting in jail.**

There are two legal spiritual paths in Brasil that use the same sacrament. One is the Daime. The other is the União de Vegetal, or UDV. While sharing origins in the Amazon region, we have different rituals, somewhat different cosmologies, and we occupy different socio-economic and political spaces in the Brasilian milieux. Ralph Metzner, a pioneer in the investigation and popularization of sacred plants, once described the difference between the rituals of the Daime and UDV like this: The UDV is like a combination of a Protestant church and an AA meeting. The Daime is like a cross between a Native American Church meeting and a Gospel church ceremony.

Contemporaneous to the Daime arriving in the US, the UDV opened their first center, or “nucleo” in Santa Fe, under the direction of Jeffrey Bronfman. Although there was no coordination between us, no communication on any level, on this fateful day in May 1999, we and they “coincidentally” brought our sacraments (They call theirs Hoasca. It has the same formula and method of making as Daime.) into the US in what turned out in the end to be by the same route. We in Oregon evolved from carrying the tea in our suitcases to shipping it by freight from Brasil and bringing it through customs in Los Angeles through what is called an import broker. The UDV found its way to the same broker. And on May 18, 1999, the UDV in Santa Fe, New Mexico and the Santo Daime in Ashland, Oregon had our non-coordinated, simultaneous shipments of sacred tea intercepted and seized in Los Angeles customs by agents of the federal government of the United States. They were looking for us and they found the UDV also. The federal agents, in a joint effort by the DEA and FBI, assumed the role of couriers of the teas, arriving at the offices of Jeffery Bronfman in Santa Fe and at my house in Oregon. They seized Jeffrey’s tea. They seized our tea, held our 16- and 12-year-old children at gunpoint for two hours until Jane and I got home from the bedside of a brother in our community who had died that day. They put me in handcuffs, ransacked our home, and took me to jail.

The experience of that day and its aftermath continue to be surreal for me. It’s one thing to stand up the government in your mind, surrounded by friends. It’s another to have 9 strutting male agents of the FBI and DEA wearing flak jackets and wielding rifles and pistols invade your home, thinking they are busting a major new drug ring.

On that beautiful spring day, when we drove up to our forest home, coming from the peaceful, spiritually charged bedside of our brother who had died of AIDS-related brain disease that morning, there was a mobile home in our driveway. Since I neither owned a mobile home, nor knew anyone who did, I naturally started sorting through the possibilities of how it got there. When five large men dressed in black, wearing bulletproof vests and pointing guns at me surrounded the car and started yelling “Put your hands up!”, that thing that they say happens in such a moment, happened. Time became slow motion. The thoughts came at 1/10th speed, “Oh, they must have chased a criminal who was driving a motor home up our road”. Then the next thought rolled slowly across my awareness, “Oh, Oh, shit. Here it is. Here we go.” My focus became clear and pointed. We had been expecting something like this for years. Up until this moment that expectation had been abstract and a bit romanticized. But here were a bunch of big armed dudes surrounding me and my wife, obviously worried that I had a gun hidden under the dashboard. They were deadly serious. I had to be also.

In the car with me were Jane in the passenger front seat and a dear friend, a woman named Eva who was living with us at the time, in the back. Eva was 74 years old and going quite deaf. When the agents ordered me to raise my hands, they had instructed me to turn the car off and open the door, but the key had remained in the ignition. I asked them if I could take the key out. They said no. At which point the car began beeping loudly and constantly. The agents were yelling, “Everybody put your hands up or we’ll shoot!” Jane and I were complying. Eva was yelling, “What are they saying?” I was thinking, “They’re gonna shoot me because Eva’s deaf. What a pathetic way to go.” Finally, Eva got the message with Jane and me yelling frantically for her to put her hands up.

They put me in handcuffs. When they brought us into our house, our children, plus a Polish exchange student who was living with us (He said it was no big deal for him. It was “like Poland under the communists”.) were sitting in the living room surrounded by another 4 agents. My 12- year-old daughter was understandably terrified but composed. My son who was 16 was pretending he wasn’t scared. At one point, one of the agents, an undercover guy wearing a black tee-shirt, with rolled up sleeves, a goatee, and long hair, stood spread-stance in the middle of the living room, declaring, “As far I am concerned, these children are victims”. My son Aaron, who was already well over 6 feet tall, stood up, looked the dude in the eye, and said, “I am nobody’s victim. I make my own decisions”. My admiration for them has only grown since that traumatic day. They conducted themselves with nobility, calm, and an instinctive sense of truth and of their, and our, worth. Jane said to the kids, “Don’t talk to them. They are not your friends.” For reasons that are familiar to anyone who has dealt with macho men who fancy themselves righteous and in charge, Jane’s non-compliance pissed them off to no end. Four hours later, as they were dragging me to a car on the way to jail, that same wannabe tough guy said to me, “’Bout time your fucking wife shut up.” To which I replied, “Oh right. I invade your house, hold your kids at gunpoint and ransack the house. And what, your wife is gonna make me a cup of tea?”

What they had obviously expected to find was a situation to match their image of a drug house: pornography, drugs, guns, stacks of money, people lying around in drug induced states. What they found was a home populated by healthy people who obviously loved and respected each other; a house filled with statues and pictures of saints, with crystals and flowers and a dog who was smart enough to not attack them. From the beginning of the process, they didn’t know what to do with us. Let’s remember that at that time, no one in the world outside of a very limited circle had even heard of Ayahuasca/Daime. It’s appearance on their radar (a story for another day) could only be fit into their existing paradigm; illegal dangerous drugs being smuggled for enormous profit by people whose only motivation was greed. We weren’t them. They didn’t have a category for us. Like almost everyone in almost every situation, they proceeded to operate within their pre-existing paradigm. I was a drug dealer bringing a new drug from South America, our children were victims of our criminal enterprise and moral degeneracy, and their righteous job was to intimidate us into handing over the higher-ups in the chain of heinousness.

One of the invader crew, their young driver, came and stood in the living room where we were sitting, me in handcuffs in a chair, the rest of the family on the couch. He took the obligatory macho stance, and said,” I just don’t understand why you want to do this. I guess I’m just too much of a Baptist.” I said, “Do you know who your religion is named after?” No, he says. “It was named after John the Baptist. Do you know what happened to him?” No, he says. “They cut his head off because he wouldn’t stop telling the truth to the government.”

John the Baptist is one of the iconic beings guiding the Daime path. His earthly representative was Padrinho Sebabstião Mota de Melo, whose portrait is on the shelf in our living room. Jane and I stood under that picture when they took our photo for their records. I figured we should get the saints in on the deal as soon as we could.

After the ransacking had produced books with Portuguese language songs, cassette tapes of those songs, no pornography, no money, and a very small amount of marijuana, they took me to jail. They put me in a car with the two DEA tough guys; the aforementioned cartoon of an undercover agent and the head of the operation, a strutting little rooster of a DEA man who was deadly serious about this “operation” and definitively in charge. There had been discussion among the 9 agents about taking me to jail. Some of them were playing good cop. They let me take off my wedding ring and my watch so they wouldn’t get stolen in jail. I was supposed to be grateful, so the next day when those nice guys brought me home, I would gratefully spill the beans on my higher-ups in the drug importation chain. In the meantime, long-hair guy and rooster guy tried to scare me into confessing. As we rode in the jeep toward the jail, one guy says to the other- just chatting- “Yeah, how long you figure he’s going away for?” The other guy- just chatting- says, “Importing with intent to distribute? That’s 30 years.” Other guy, “Wow, never seeing his wife again, never seeing his kids grow up. What a shame.” I said, “Who writes your scripts?”

When we got to the Medford County Lockup, the federal guys turned me over to the local guys to book me. They fingerprinted me, then took me into a small area where I was ordered to take off all my clothes and stand against a wall. A young cop, who I imagined was a new hire and thus at the bottom of the seniority heap, and who in my imagination, before ending up working in the jail in Medford, Oregon, had been in the military after playing linebacker in high school, ordered me in a monotone voice, attempting to display not a blip of emotion or interest, to bend over and spread my butt cheeks so he could inspect my anus for imbedded contraband. And he then ordered me to turn around and “lift your penis balls”, so he could make sure I hadn’t secreted a derringer or a bag of heroin in my crotch. He was trying to act like it didn’t embarrass him to death to be examining another man’s privates. I had to squeeze my lips to keep from laughing at this poor guy who was so mortifyingly embarrassed.

My orifices declared sufficiently free of contraband, the young, earnest fellow ordered me to put on the pink pajamas that were the fashion of the jail, and walk into the cell across the hall. As I was walking the 12 feet or so, I heard a voice sing in my right ear. It was a song, a hymn from the Daime world received by the founder of the Daime, Master Raimundo Irineu Serra. Its translation is: *I entered a battle/ I saw my people discouraged/ We have to win with power of the Lord God/ Virgin Mother with the power that you give me/ You give me strength, you give me Light/ You don’t let me get knocked down/ The Divine Eternal Father and the Virgin of Conception/ Everyone got up with their arms in their hand/ Virgin Mother with the power you give me/ You give me strength, you give me Light/ You don’t let me get knocked down.”*

The battle was on. And I knew who was in my army.

My time in jail was neither long (12 hours) nor particularly traumatic, especially compared to what many people face. The hardest part was that I was denied a phone call, even though every cop show says you get one. Jane didn’t know where I was, what the bad cops had done with me, and I didn’t know what efforts she was making to get me out. The denial of that TV right came when I asked a guard through the little window in the cell door if I could make a call. On my side, I thought I was asking in a perfectly normal and calm voice. He reacted as if I was a privileged smart ass using big words to make him feel lesser. He cursed at me, called me a fucking asshole, and slammed the window shut. Breaking that down, I was for sure obviously privileged in comparison with the other men who occupied the cell with me, and most likely with the guard as well. I certainly can be and have often been a smart ass in my life, sometimes to police and often to other authority figures. It was not my experience that I was being that way on purpose in this instance, locked in a cell in the county jail. In any case, he slammed the window shut and I was left to wait for what, at the moment, was an indeterminate period of time.

My cellmates, whose number was added to over the next hours, were an assortment of characters. One guy had violated the restraining order and gone to his girlfriend’s trailer. He had been drunk. Another had violated his probation by getting drunk in public. A third was a sweet, gentle, mentally slow man who was an obviously familiar visitor to the jail. The cops treated him gently and kindly. He had gotten drunk. Many of the 7 knew each other. I was the odd man out. When one of them asked me what I was in for, I said, “The government doesn’t like my religion.” “Wait, are you a minister?” “Sort of.” “So, Rev, can I ask you about…” We talked until they all fell asleep. I didn’t sleep a wink. I stepped over the sweet man lying on the floor to use the in-wall toilet.

At 2 o’clock the next afternoon, I was called out of the cell to a small room where I met with a lawyer who I’ve never seen since. He had been contacted by Jane after a frantic night of polling everyone we knew for a name. In the end, she picked him out of the phonebook. He said, “You’re not the usual type of person I represent.” I gave him the first of what would be many explanations of the Daime to official type people over the next ten years. They let me out without charging me with anything. They never did.

The FBI guys who had come to our house the day before and had let me leave my ring behind- “the good cops”- drove me home. They chatted me up, joking and being my pals. As we got closer to my house, one of them, who looked like he would fit right in on the surfing beach in southern California, said, “So, if wanted to join your church, how would I go about that?” I said, “Well, if you were sincerely seeking healing and spiritual knowledge, you’d be totally welcome”. Then the other one said, “You know, the first one on the bus gets the front seat.” Meaning, if I wanted to make a deal to save my ass from prison as they busted my drug ring, I’d better start talking. I didn’t.

The faith-informed adrenaline of that first encounter with the federal government lasted a month. Then the state of Oregon Child Protective Services called our kids out of class and quizzed them as to whether their parents were making them take drugs. They both said no and I’m not talking to you. But suddenly the fact that we were facing a system that had endless money, endless guns, a very narrow world view that didn’t include plant medicine-based religion as a legitimate human pursuit, and endless temporal power was made clear to us. Then Jane and I got scared. On a morning in June, Jane woke up seeing vision of a courthouse. Standing in front of the doors of the courthouse, like giant pillars, were two enormous guardian angels. At the same time, I woke up with another Daime hymn in my head. I recognized the tune, but at that time I wasn’t yet familiar enough with the large number of hymns that make up the Daime lexicon to identify which it was. I called the woman who held the official position in our church of the lead singer, a necessary and honored position in a spiritual path whose main form of worship is the hours-long communal signing of sacred songs received, or channeled, by initiated members of the circle. I hummed the tune to her. She told me which hymn it was. It was no. 123 in the hymnbook of the leader the Daime, the same Padrinho Alfredo who had somehow predicted my ending up in jail. (When I called him in Europe when I got of jail and asked him, “How did you know?”, he said, “Something in the air.”)

Here's what the hymn says, in part: *The Sovereign Virgin Mother/Is the firmness of my songs/ It to her that I am surrendered/ She is my lawyer.*

The actual final word in the verse in Portuguese is *advogada,* which literally translated means *advocate*. It is also the Portuguese word for a female lawyer. We got the message. From that day to this, we have never again been scared of the government. We knew that in the end we were going to win. I mean, if the Virgin Mary is your lawyer, and she has her team of gigantic angels holding the space of justice and safety, what’s there to be afraid of?

Six months later, in December of 1999, She brought me her earthly representative, a lawyer name Roy Haber. We met in the office of my first lawyer, a criminal attorney who had taken the case up to the point where the US Attorney in Oregon had sent me a message through her. The message was that he wasn’t going to charge me with drug trafficking right now. *“But if I ever hear that you are bringing that tea in or conducting ceremonies with it, I’m coming after you.”* That threat would form the basis of our petition 9 years later to the Federal District Court for injunctive relief from the threat of government prosecution.

It wasn’t enough for us that the government had backed down. It had never been just about being safe in our semi-underground existence. It had been our assigned mission from the first time I cluelessly drank Daime on that mountaintop in rural Brasil in January 1988, to liberate our spiritual practice. We had been forced into taking on that fight in a strange way, but here it was.

The government backing off prosecuting me was the first in what would be long list of temptations to let the fight go. Tests of faith always involve temptation to stop in a seemingly safe zone, avoiding the unknown possibilities; what might or might not happen if you go forward. But stepping into the unknown with the intuitive certainty that you have invisible but real help is one good definition of faith. At that point we didn’t have money or connections. But we had renewed and unshakeable faith.

Roy Haber was a genius who had applied his immensely discerning intellect and his passion for justice to civil rights law. (He was once described by Morris Dees, the founder of the Southern Poverty Law Conference, as “The greatest civil rights lawyer of our era.”) He had dedicated his life to protecting and gaining the civil rights of disempowered people. He had been intimately involved in the civil rights fight in the south in the 1960’s. He had fought successfully for the rights of incarcerated people. He was involved in the protection of the right of Native Americans to use their sacrament of peyote. And he had worked for the Department of Justice in the Civil Rights Division. He knew of what he spoke and of what we were letting ourselves in for. He took serious cases with broad implications. When we met that day in that law office in Eugene, he basically thought I was an aging hippy using a church as an excuse to do drugs. Which was fine with him, just not something to which he was interested in devoting himself. After we talked for a while, he changed his opinion. We began a ten-year collaboration that would make us not exactly friends and not exactly client and lawyer, but something in between and beyond that challenged us both, and, at least for me, was one of the most important relationships of my life. I got to observe an utterly dedicated genius at work. And he allowed me to be, as he put it, not the usual client. I got to exercise my latent lawyer muscles, inherited from my attorney father, laid aside in the political tumult of the 1960’s and in answering the call to healership and spiritual stewardship. Roy and I talked on the phone multiple times a week, sometimes multiple times a day. We explored legal and spiritual questions raised by the uncharted territory we were operating in. We were two smart Jewish guys from the east coast, and so we naturally argued, sometimes cursing at each other. We faced huge challenges in both the preparation of the case and especially in eventually bringing it to the court. Roy was meticulous, over-preparing everything, going over every word of every paper a hundred times. He prodded the Justice Department, looking for a way to settle the case out of court, knowing from his time working in the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department that they, in what he called their “institutional ego”, would never agree to what was a simple, lawful, and logical request; let us practice our legitimate religion without the threat of your throwing us in jail. Nevertheless, we played it out. We went to Washington to meet with representatives of the Justice Department. Roy wrote letters both friendly and threatening. In July of 2000, we got a letter from the Justice Department of George Bush, telling us that under no circumstances would they ever legalize our use of Daime.

**Digression.**

**More background.** The Daime had come to the United States in 1987 in Massachusetts. It had spread to a small number of locations between that year and May of 1990, when the leader of the church in Boston, a Welsh man and, until he came to the Daime full time, a turbaned Sikh, named Rex Beynon, had been arrested when a shipment of Daime was intercepted. Rex spent four months in jail before being permanently deported back to Wales. The Daime in the US shut down at that time and stayed quiescent until I brought the Daime back into the country in 1993. From that time until the occurrences in 1999, the Daime came to a larger number of cities, towns, and regions than in the previous iteration, spreading, as the Daime does everywhere, by word of mouth and through the inspiration of people who come to it from various angles and stay to dedicate themselves to spiritual awakening and profound healing.

**There are six important points that I need to emphasize here for you to understand a larger point.**

The first is that the Daime is open to everyone, regardless of any earthly designations. No racial, ethnic, gender, background, political, level of spiritual evolution, or even religious opinions are in any way a consideration for participation in the Daime. That means that a) there are all kinds of people with all kinds of points of view and opinions in the Daime, and b) there are all kinds of people with all kinds of opinions and points of view in the Daime. If you get my meaning. Diversity is a blessing, absolutely right to uphold and nurture, and it’s a challenge. That eclectic mix makes for an opportunity to find common ground in relation to something deeper and more important than those designations and opinions. In that sense the Daime community provides an exciting open field for exploring ways of making decisions based on new paradigms. And on the way to the people maturing past the domination of our petty selves that want to prove we’re right and righteous, and that our ego is better than everyone else’s ego, it also makes for battles over whose opinion is better and whose opinion is going to dominate the other opinions and gain control over the people with those other opinions. Daime people are people. We have our traumas that we act out as if they mean anything beyond our own opportunity for healing. We have our ego battles, internal and between us. We have our political battles, which are just another name for ego battles.

But we have the Daime, a divine gift from the beings who know that being a human is not an easy job. It was brought to us by the Divine inspiration of Master Raimundo Irineu Serra, who took the ayahuasca out of the jungle where it had been under the care and protection of indigenous people for thousands of years. He thus began a process that has made the possibility of accessing ancient, universal wisdom, a deep, authentic vibrational connection with nature, and the possibility of accelerated spiritual evolution available to those of us in the wider world. In the Daime, we are offered a philosophy, a set of teachings that calls us to respect all beings, including ourselves. We can experience the universal, actual force of forgiveness. We can access deep levels of self-awareness, humility, and be in truthful relationship with ourselves, each other, and the divine forces. And we have a strong centrally important direction to take the teachings from the laboratory classroom of our ceremonies and put them into day-to-day practice.

We have an accelerated, spiritually evolving, challenging, simultaneously multi-leveled healing technology that affords a chance to transform our normal human stuff into something new, useful, and unity-based. Over time and with lots of Daime, we learn how to take advantage of the sacred ceremonial space and develop the faith and higher will to keep going through the difficult unravelling and transforming of those human traits: ego, trauma, doubt, fear. We learn to accept all of our parts and pieces, and to bring them all into the holding space of the heart center, which is the place through which the Daime teaches and to which the Daime calls us.

Sometimes we represent what we are taught better than others. Some of us do it more completely and with greater dedication to our own inner examination than others. During the ten years of the legal process, we in the greater Daime community, collectively, didn’t do it well for most of the time between my arrest and the freeing of the Daime. Fear, immaturity, arrogance, a lack of trust and faith, power trips, ambition, conflicting ideologies (creating unending conflict being what all ideologies end up doing), and confusion about goals all played their part. Everyone in the Daime circle, regardless of opinion and relative unconsciousness, was dedicated to the path and at least theoretically to the principles and teachings that we sing about for hours. It was just that many times we were more dedicated to our opinions and the defense of our egos than to our teachings.

**The second thing** is that all of us Daimistas in this country and around the world have been and are learning on the job. The elders from Brasil came for years to advise and train us. Many of us who had said yes to the invitation to plant a flag of Light, traveled multiple times to Brasil to absorb the wisdom and experience of the people doing this work for decades before we came along. The training of a Daime leader takes years. But with all that, running a community, firming a new and strange religion in a legally hostile country within the milieux of the spiritual dryness and pathological dedication to individuality of this one, with all the temptations of money, power, and comfort; balancing dedication to said religion with the need to put food on one’s table; healing oneself in front to the entire congregation (Daime leaders are not gurus, pretending to be above the concerns of the mundane masses); confronting one’s own ego and traumas; and reaching agreements with people who are in their own version of that process, can be, and is, a heck of a challenge. The growth curve was steep because the stakes were so high and we were still so relatively new at the job.

We have a ceremonial tradition that, when conducted according to that tradition, makes for a safe space for people to come and experience the amazing possibilities that the Daime opens for inner exploration, multi-leveled healing, and spiritual evolution. And in those first years we were learning not only how to conduct the ceremonies in an honorable and safe way, but also how to form communities and organizations that reflected both that tradition and a modern sensibility. That experiment is ongoing, both in Brasil and in the diaspora. And referring to the first point, everyone had an opinion based on previous experience, psychology, ideology, and relative levels of fear and mistrust of the government and of each other.

The legal process we had been initiated into and had accepted the challenge for pursuing, was something new for everyone involved except for Roy Haber. As a result, Roy was not only the point man for the legal aspect of the process, but the lightning rod for the various opinions and power struggles of what became a number of factions inside the Daime world. It was worse than just herding cats. It was trying to herd cats that-more than occasionally- spit and bit. And Roy and I took the brunt of the spitting and biting of that sorting out process. It was difficult, wounding, infuriating, and at times daunting. But the attacks, disagreements, and misunderstandings also served to make us ongoingly examine what we are doing and repeatedly re-up our dedication to the cause we had accepted. And to learn faith in the face of fear.

Which leads me to **the third point**; the structure of the earthly expression of the Daime. The Daime comes out of the region and therefore the cultural paradigm of the northwestern Amazon of Brasil. That culture is an eclectic mix of a feudal patron system and the indigenous tribal culture, overlaid with what is called primitive Catholicism. Which means a Catholicism based in nature and interlaced with worship of deities- often assigned thinly disguised Catholic saint equivalencies- associated with the nature-based, animist, tribal traditions and the afro-brasilian religions developed by enslaved peoples. In that system there are leaders and followers; “royal” families and those that obey and serve that family and benefit from the protection and guidance of the assumed-to-be elevated family members. It is a system that works to an extent, especially for the royal family members, when the community is isolated in one relatively small area and made up primarily of extended family members and others with traditional ties to the community and the region. It also involves a general lack of formal education, intense, hand-to-mouth poverty for many of the non-royals, and an insularity of the culture. It can be extremely self-protective, sometimes to the point of violence. And its cultural traditions: music, dance, storytelling, intimacy with and reverence for nature; direct contact with spiritual forces; the strength and faith that come from the immediacy of life in that setting, have much to teach those of us coming from the arrogant, colonializing, insulated-by-stuff, disconnected from nature and from ourselves north.

The Daime, if you stick with it and really get that it is a teacher of profound wisdom and wide and deep knowledge, will humble you and tear down your internal paradigm, so that you can eventually receive that knowledge through vibration and inner revelation and by personal experience with those people coming from that very different take on life on earth.

In the middle 1980’s, under the immense courage and wisdom of Padrinho Sebastião Mota de Melo and later under the guidance of his son Padrinho Alfredo, the Daime started to spread outside that relatively cloistered Amazonian world, first to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, then throughout Brasil, and on to North America, Japan, the pacific south, and Europe. That older form of organization, traditional to the Amazon, came into relationship with the semi-democratic and individualistic cultural and political traditions of the Euro-American countries. My generation has been the shepherds and witnesses of that process. It’s been a fascinating and challenging dance. Sorting out what is divinely given teaching and what is cultural filtering of those teachings is a profound study. In Daime speak, what is Doctrine and what is tradition. They are not the same thing. One is sacred, one is habitual. We in the north have had to learn how to adapt our democratic traditions, aspirations, and beliefs in equality with other definitions of those things. Obedience to authority in and of itself is not something that the American culture encourages. Balancing respect for elders and tradition with following ones own inner guidance is a fraught and worthy investigation. To be engaged in the study, as we say in the Daime, is to be learning and growing from the friction of cultures and paradigms. It leads to experimentation, examination, and often, correction.

Here is **the fourth, and related, point**. The Daime is a grown-up path. I have described the Daime as a *theocratic anarchy*. There is no pope or head guru proclaiming how everyone must be and do and believe. And there is no enforcement mechanism if such a person existed. There is no excommunication in *the esoteric, gnostic, primitive Christian path of the Santo Daime.* There is purposely wide latitude given to each Daimista to interpret our experience in the ceremonies and in our life: to draw our own conclusions, to change those conclusions based on newly revealed truth, to learn the lessons afforded by the inner confrontation with our dents and our glories and choose how we are going to apply them in the day to day. By the declaration of Padrinho Sebastião, the second-generation leader who had taken his people to the depth of the Amazon Forest to be free to live as they chose, and who had then allowed the Daime to leave the state of Acre to begin its journey around the world, “Only I can unravel my encounter with Jesus”. Which means that your inner experience is your own to understand and make use of as you wish. The Daime ritual and teachings provide context and clear direction for living a spiritualized, eventually Christed life. The multi-generational community gives examples of those who have come before you. And each of us is encouraged to make autonomous use of the teachings and the inspiration that comes from inner communion, and then to bring those teachings to bear on our lives on earth.

That freedom and responsibility also translates into each community being able to determine its own policies, its own decision-making structures, and, in our case, to decide to pursue the legalization of our spiritual practice despite the fierce opposition of some other leaders of various communities, including some of the leaders from Brasil.

It was a serious and fraught responsibility that we took on. Without the double-edged sword of an in-charge hierarchy, the path we took to eventually arrive in court in front of the federal judge involved innumerous choice points and huge self-examination. A major choice point was the decision by some other leaders of churches outside of Ashland, Oregon, our home base, to join us in the lawsuit as plaintiffs. They faced strong pressure to, at best, stay on the sidelines. That they overcame that pressure and their own natural doubts to bravely decide to step up and join us, allowed us to form the unity that became the energetic, emotional, and spiritual basis of our eventual victory. We won because we were right spiritually and legally, because we had brilliant lawyers, and because we had unity based in faith among the people who stepped forward. And eventually the ones who were scared, confused, ideologically opposed, and ego-committed joined in the unity. Some by actively supporting us, the rest by quieting down and praying.

The resolution of the internal debate in the Daime world about legalization came at a convention in September 2007 at a retreat center in upstate New York. The leaders of the various Daime churches in the US had spent the previous five years trying unsuccessfully to come up with a structure for a national organization that everyone could agree on. This meeting was our last shot at finding a place of unity. We utterly failed. Even the flies on the wall were embarrassed to see how shoddily we conducted our business. We showed that Daime people are just people, and not particularly enlightened or psychologically and emotionally worked out people.

The result of the meeting was a semi-friendly divorce. It was like being in marriage that stopped being fun a long time ago, but you stayed together for the kids. You tried therapy, you tried a trial separation. Then you did therapy again. You went to church for years, praying for peace and love to prevail. And finally, you realize that this marriage was never going to work because you have irreconcilable differences. And the divorce is a huge relief to everyone. You did everything you could. Now it’s time for everyone to go their own way.

That was in September 2007. We had put the case on hold as we tried to create the unity that became apparent was never going to happen. In December of that year, I called Roy Haber and said, “Let’s take it off the shelf.” The fact that the only arguments I would have for the next 8 months were with Roy over strategy, was like being let out of prison.

**The fifth** important aspect of the story is that the União de Vegetal (UDV) went first, particularly in getting a decision from the US Supreme Court. There is confusion in discreet circles about that decision. The Supreme Court, in an 8-0 decision, affirmed the UDV’s right to pursue their lawsuit against the government, thereby opening the door for the district judge to rule in the UDV’s favor. That unanimous Supreme Court decision then laid to rest any argument that the government might have made in our case as to our standing to sue. It simplified our path. I was and remain grateful and offer respect to the UDV and its leaders who pursued their case with firmness, faith, and courage.

The UDV had two advantages over us. The first was endless money. We had to raise the large sum of money that it took to hire the lawyers, prepare the documents, depose experts, do the paperwork, etc. The UDV had ready access to as much money as they needed. Going to the Supreme Court is seriously expensive.

And also, the UDV had exactly the type of top-down, bureaucratic, business-like organization that allowed it to have top-to-bottom unquestioned unity and clear, un-herding-cats decision making. They could pursue their case single-mindedly, which was a great advantage when it came to operating in the legal system. All the UDV groups fell in line behind the US leadership, which was backed up and mandated by the leaders in Brasil. That was not our situation. My inborn inability to operate within that type of top-down, rigid structure is one of the many reasons I’m a Daimista, not a Vegitalista. And yet I have admiration for some of their ways of operating their organization. They can get stuff done way quicker and more efficiently than we can. But on balance I prefer our semi-chaos to their rigidity.

**The sixth point** I want to make is, in the end, the most important one. All the previous points dealt with the earthly necessities, the material level choices we had to make; the organization, the choices of strategy, the raising of money, the meetings. They point to the fact that we had to do our due diligence; to do our earthly job as part of the team that was bringing a bit more of freedom to earth, firming an authentic ray of Light, making a spiritual healing technology available to those who want to partake of it, with no consideration other than that desire.

*What I want to remind you of is the other part of the team.*

In the last two years before we went to court in September 2008, in every Daime work (ceremonies are called works) I did -which number I would estimate to be 150- at some point in the work when, as we say, the power was strong, I closed my eyes, stood or sat in front of the cross in the middle of the ceremonial space, got as humble and neutrally available as I knew how, and asked a question of the invisible presences that guide the Daime ceremonies and path from the inner planes. In every ceremony I said the same thing inside myself in communion with “them”. *“If I’m wrong, if what we are doing is not blessed, if I am imposing my ego on a sacred mission, show me and I’ll stop.”* I did this in ceremonies that I led. I did it in ceremonies led by the people in the Daime world who were most against what we were doing. And in every single instance the response was the same. It came in different forms. Sometimes with a brilliant vibrating Light that cleared the doubtful thoughts from my consciousness. Sometimes as a not-mine voice that came accompanying the Light. Finally, in August of 2008, the presences had had enough. When I presented myself in front of the cross in a ceremony, the voice said, “Look, I’ve told you the same thing every time you’ve asked. I’m not going to give you a different answer. So don’t ask me again. Either do it or don’t.”

So, we did.

On Friday, September 5, 2008, Roy Haber submitted our request for a temporary injunction against the United States Department of Justice to the US District Court in Medford, Oregon. It had been 9 years and four months since the federal police had invaded my house, confiscated our sacrament, terrorized my children at gunpoint, taken me to jail, and threatened my wife and me with prison. It felt like having carried a backpack of rocks up a mountain and finally dropping it.

It was our excellent fortune that the judge assigned to our case was one Owen M. Panner. We went to court before him on January 19, 2009.

Judge Panner was 84 years old at the time of our hearing. He looked like he could sit next to a toadstool wearing a green hat and a red coat, dispensing advice to lost travelers. And not one thing slipped by him in his domain of his court room. At one point he had one of the young government lawyers, who was obviously trying her first case, in near tears as he demanded that she leave her meticulous notes and tell him the point she wanted to make.

The Justice department, which at that moment was still that of George Bush, sent their C team to try our case. Judge Panner, at the end of the two-day hearing, admonished them and their bosses for the shoddy case they had put on. He said it was waste of all our time, a huge waste of paper, and it “was almost enough to make me change my registration from Republican to Democrat.” Everyone in the courtroom was thinking at this point, “What, George Bush wasn’t enough to make you change your registration?”

The government had no leg to stand on, legally. They made idiotic arguments, each one of which was refuted easily by our attorneys, and was dismissed by Judge Panner, who was a conservative in the older sense of the word that has all but lost meaning today. He believed in the rule of law. He believed in order. He believed in truth as could be assessed by facts and logical, calm, clear argument.

He said at the end of the second day of the hearing, “Look, everyone here knows how I’m going to rule. It’s simple. These people have a right to practice their religion, and our job is to help them do that.”

**We had to show four things** for him to feel comfortable ruling for us based on the laws of the United States- the first Amendment to the Constitution, and the Freedom of Religion Restoration Act (RFRA). That, along with the Supreme Court’s affirmation of the UDV (and by extension our) right to bring the petition to him, made the legal case open and shut.

**What we had to show in court.**

To make our case, we had to show that:

1. We were a legitimate, real religion. We had to show that we were part of a preexisting and demonstrable religious lineage. This is obviously one of the major challenges for the groups in present day seeking to gain legal status on our coattails. Judge Panner’s and Judge Parker’s rulings in ours and the UDV’s respective cases did not legalize the use of Daime, Hoasca, ayahuasca in the United States. Those rulings legalized our respective use of our sacraments in our ceremonies.
2. Secondly, we had to show that we had a demonstrable history of doing our work safely. A team of our church members spent weeks using Witeout to redact by hand the names of the many hundreds of people who had attended our ceremonies over the years from the sign-in sheets we had used for each ceremony since 1993. The government lawyers then said, “Judge, they’ve been doing their ceremonies illegally.” To which Judge Panner replied, “What do you expect them to do?” We were able to further show that in those 15 years, not one person had been harmed, had a medical emergency, or had filed any sort of complaint against us.

The government lawyers complained that we were not a licensed medical facility, and therefore should not be allowed to receive anyone because we couldn’t accurately ascertain their medical status. Both we and the judge agreed that, yes, we were not a medical facility and, no, we didn’t need to be one.

We described the due diligence we conducted with everyone who came to us. We had made sure that people were both informed and, hopefully, honest in the reporting of their medical histories. We showed the Judge our elaborate intake papers. We described the interviewing process that each potential participant must go through. The judge praised us and accepted our agreement to eliminate people from participation who have the very few medical conditions that make it hard for someone to participate in a long ceremony, who exhibit a small number of psychological/mental challenges, or who are taking certain pharmaceutical drugs.

1. Thirdly, we had to show that we cared for the Daime itself. I will concede that the government does have an interest in stopping the commercial sale of drugs. Their reasons for doing so are bogus, and they are total failures at it. But people making gigantic profit from other people’s wish to be in altered states, and especially since many of those substances are made badly, can be deadly, and encourage and promote addiction, does leave a role for agencies monitoring the influx and distribution of substances into the country. I well understand that the agencies in question are corrupt, their programs are based on lies and the enforcement is arbitrary, racist, and ineffective. But in our case, the legitimate interface between us and the DEA is over the importation and care of our sacrament. And here’s the thing. We are infinitely more interested than the government in the preservation of the sacredness and designated use of the Daime. Therefore, we are supremely careful in making sure that the Daime tea is used only in our ceremonies and only given to people who are ready to receive it and administered by people who are trained to do so. Therefore, the establishing of the regulations as to how we would care for, record, and account for the Daime was simple and straightforward.

4) The fourth thing is a corollary to the third. We showed that we were not doing this for profit, or influence, of for any other reason than that this is our path, our religion, our love, and for charity.

5) The fifth thing I want to point out is more abstract, but I believe no less important to our success. We didn’t lie. After so many years of smuggling our sacrament into the country, so long of being vigilant, so long ignoring the whispers of fear of what would happen someday and then did, we went to court and laid it on the judge’s bench. It was a huge relief. When I was on the stand (which I had rehearsed for 10 years in the shower), I could confidently say to the judge that this is who we are, this what we do, and we were both proud and humble about it. We could say with absolute truth that what you see is what you get, which is still true today.

Actually, I have to admit that we did fudge one thing. I live in a town where many people go to the Shakespeare theatre in shorts and tee shirts. When fifty of us went to court, many of us didn’t even have things like suits. Some of us had never tied a tie before. (But then some of us had had Bar Mitzvahs and Communions.) But we cleaned up good. Good Will came in handy. The judge at one point commented that he was seeing, “a group of very nice-looking people here in my courtroom”. He himself wore Birkenstocks, telling my children at lunch time to, “Watch out for my toes.” Judge Panner was the essence of a gentleman and a scholar. There are far too few like him left to dispense actual, non-political justice.

We made our presentation to the judge on January 20, 2009. In the Daime ceremonial calendar, January 20 is the day of Saint Sebastian, who wouldn’t stop telling the truth of his religion, who was shot full of arrows by Roman government archers but survived. Judge Panner rendered his ruling freeing us from government interference on April 19, which is the day of Saint Joseph, who is the ultimate symbol of following your faith even when you don’t know exactly why or where you’ll end up.

On the evening of that decision, we of course did a Daime work. Two things happened for me in that work. First, I felt like an anvil was lifted off my shoulders. Second, I understood clearly that the freeing of our spiritual path to practice without potential for government oppression was my life assignment. The unwavering commitment that Jane and I had felt from the beginning of our mission in 1993, the inability to quit when it seemed hopeless and in the face of opposition from many quarters, even with the painful toll that it took on our family, was a karmic imperative that we had now fulfilled. I felt a soul-level freedom accompanying the earthly victory. I could look back on my life, even to who I was in it; white, male, middle class, Jewish first-born, American, and what I had done in my life; anti-war, critical of society, government defying activism, not cowed by powerful people, non-traditional profession, and see how I had been set up, trained, and given the resources-inner and outer- to do this job of freeing our religion from those who would ignorantly seek to crush us.

In May of 2009, we brought the first legally protected Daime into the United States from Brasil. We came through customs in Atlanta with official papers from the DEA, stamped with an eagle symbol, authorizing us to bring 300 liters of our sacrament into the country. When we got to customs, we were met by a uniformed customs policeman, who looked at the papers and said to me, “Hello Mr. Goldman. My name is Lieutenant Sullivan. My job is to help you.” I both laughed and cried a little. It had been ten years, almost to the day, from sitting on the bed with Padrinho Alfredo, hearing about his father’s courage in the face of the government’s ignorance.

**Epilogue**

We have now been free from that interference for 14 years. In that time, we have established and maintained a harmonious working relationship with the US government. We import our Daime exclusively from Brasil. We account for every drop of it, both internally and to the DEA when they request our accounting. They do not interfere with us, and we do not try to bypass any of our agreements with them, which are straightforward and even fair.

Once they lost the battle, they gave up the fight. In truth, they never really cared about us one way or the other. There was no glory in it for them in taking us down, no increase in their budget for triumphing over the small number of religious people importing a tea from the Amazon, people who were not selling it or promoting it or distributing it. From the moment they invaded our house with the image of what they would find shattered by the reality of who we were, they would just as soon we went away. But when we demanded our rights, they had to fight, even though in reality they had no case, legally, morally, or spiritually. As Roy Haber said, on the government’s part it was about “institutional ego.” Aber said, it was about “institutional ego” on their part.HaberHaH

On our part, it was and still is about offering a sacred, safe-on-every- level, pristine, expertly managed, non-egoic, authentic, directly linked-up spiritual space where anyone with any human designation who is ready to meet themselves, transform their pain and confusion in Light, enter authentic inner communion with divinity, and take the next steps in their spiritual evolution, can do so. The only consideration is whether someone wants to and is ready to enter that space. The only guarantee we make to people who come to us is that they will be safe on every level, and they will be cared for in the ceremony. The rest is between then and Spirit. People of every designation, every profession, every identity, every point of view can come drink Daime with us if they choose to do so. That is why we fought for ten years to free our religion from government interference and why 14 years later we still maintain a full schedule of ceremonies.

No government has the ethical, moral, or spiritual right to tell anyone what they can individually do with the divine gift of their body. Human laws, on the other hand, vary. I have great respect for the people who are presently challenging the US government to get what is rightfully ours. The government slammed the door behind us and the UDV, creating smokescreens and deceptive promises to waylay anyone else seeking to get through that door. The DEA has an alleged registration process by which they promise to examine the petitions of groups seeking their inherent rights. It’s a ruse. A present lawsuit on behalf of a church rightfully refusing to engage with that sham of a promise has likened that registration process to a door painted on a cement wall.

And just in the last couple of months, a new church, not affiliated with us or the UDV, and linked directly to Indigenous traditions, won its lawsuit, by settlement, against the government. It heralds new round of opening for the authentic use of plant teachers in sacred space. The lawyers for this new case were once part of our team. I am both proud and humbled that we pried the door open for new folks to squeeze through.

The clear trend, despite the bizarre “culture wars’ going on in this country, is towards freedom of conscience, exploration of the mystery of consciousness, and freedom of engagement with plant teachers. As Jimmy Cliff sang in *The Harder They Come,* “They’re putting up resistance, but I know that my faith will lead me on.”

There are lawyers almost as smart as Roy Haber who will continue to use the courts to gain justice for their clients who are legitimately practicing sacred, spiritual, safe plant medicine. I am confident that those of us who have been called to serve medicine to our fellow blind amnesiacs, so we can wake up together, will create self-regulating mechanisms to ensure that the holiness and integrity of what we do is preserved and maintained. And I am grateful that we live in a country where the law is, at times, still applied fairly. We pray for our brothers and sisters and dear ones around the world who are battling in their countries for the rights we have gained.

The trend in these strange, contradictory times of the long, twisting transition of humanity from loyalty to conflict, greed, aggression, and exploitation to the state of unity, harmony, and compassion is towards freedom of choice around the use of plant medicine. Even though repression of the use of plant medicines is presently strong in many places, including towards the Daime, that repression is an acknowledgement of the trend towards freedom. I am honored to be in on the continuation of that movement, fought for by my antecedents in Brasil, in this country by the Native American Church, in unity with all those in every venue cherishing and fighting for freedom, many paying a far, far greater price than we have, in the holding open of the door to spirit for those of Her children who are ready to come home.

Jonathan Goldman

Ashland, Oregon

July 1, 2024