



Conscious Life presents

Psychedelics: Mainstream to Underground

Guest: Jamie Wheal

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[00:00:05] Alexander Beiner

Hi, everybody. I'm here with Jamie Wheal. Jamie is a writer and the founder of the Flow Genome Project. He's the author of the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Stealing Fire*, as well as *Recapture the Rapture*. He's also written and spoken extensively on the psychedelic renaissance, and the pros and cons of what happens when altered states go mainstream. So Jamie, welcome.

Jamie Wheal

Hi there. How are you?

Alexander Beiner

Jamie, we've had conversations like this a few times in the past, and the past is where I wanted to start because since about 2018 or so, you've been warning about the potential downsides of the psychedelic renaissance, and the psychedelic capitalism, which we've talked about before. We're 6 years on from 2018. I'm curious maybe you could give people a bit of a sense of what your concerns have been with psychedelic capitalism and how you see the field now.

Jamie Wheal

Warnings and concerns almost seem a little fraud, it was more like, Hey, this looks like the trends and trajectories, so we should at least be aware of them. I would say, in the before times, this was 2017, 2018, tracking all things countercultural and state shifting, everything from tier one special operations folks to Silicon Valley, to transformational things like Boom Festival or Burning Man in the States, to the beginnings of the psychedelic renaissance.

[00:01:49] Jamie Wheal

Just saying, What does it look like is going to happen based on the big trends? I remember giving a talk at a San Francisco psychedelic conference and saying, Hey, look, we are here in the Gartner as a research institution, they famously came up with the Gartner Hype Cycle, which is basically inflated expectations, trough of disillusionment, and then you climb back to the other side with some more realistic level set thing.

This happens with pharmaceutical drug releases like, Percocet's going to save the world, or OxyContin, or any of those. And then we end up with a more level-set experience.

The same thing you could say with AI. We're probably off the peak of illusions, excitement, and froth, and heading towards, it's not all that, or it's got mixed bags, or that thing.

All I did was say, Hey, we're probably going to follow a similar arc when it comes to this psychedelic renaissance. But the catch, or the twist right now, is we're also facing a poly-crisis or a meta-crisis, or whatever we'd say. We don't have the time to burn, and the calories to waste, diving down into that trough like we did in the '60s and '70s.

Is there a way to go from the excitement and the froth of 2018, to now 2024, and not go through that dip? Part of the things that were pulling us into that dip were structural. It didn't require a crystal ball, and it didn't require any particular skills, wisdom, or insight to simply say, Oh, psychedelics are going from an underground countercultural movement to an above-ground market-based movement.

If you're plugging things into the market as Rick Doblin, the founder of MAPS, the predominant nonprofit organization that has been both socializing, validating, and now legalizing access to psychedelics in the US and elsewhere. He made a decision, it was a strategic decision, and it started 30 years ago, it was, can we get these compounds, specifically psychedelics, validated as medical interventions?

If you do that, you both squash and de-emphasize any of the historic, anthropological, spiritual, religious elements, magical, and mystical elements of those states, and you medicalize them. This is relevant because it might prompt you to stop smoking, alleviate depression, cure insomnia, or anxiety, or anything else that's in the, at least in the States, the DSM 5, the Diagnostic of Statistical Manuals. It's a coded illness, doctors can write it, and you can get co-pay insurance to do all of that.

That was one big switch that got thrown, and it was a calculated deal with the devil. It both worked to validate and bring these things out of the underground, and out of marginalized counterculture to say, Look, these are worthwhile, there's hurting people that need them, and that's important, and medical, medical... As well as the emphasis on veterans for PTSD. If anybody has been following, Oh, wow, I've read something about psilocybin or MDMA for our noble red-blooded soldiers, god bless them. That also was a strategic marketing decision, it was saying, Hey, this is the most sympathetic populace.

[00:05:27] Jamie Wheal

Of course, there are plenty of humans who suffer abysmal trauma, including children, including women, domestic violence, sexual violence, and all these things. But the thought was, Hey, this is the best thing to cross the aisle politically.

Conservatives, who have been the bulwark against this stuff, against lefty counterculture, enviro, all the things, now couldn't say no because it's the Oscar Wilde, patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel. So Rick, in a little bit of trickster judo, turned that back and harnessed patriotism to psychedelic medical validation.

That's just a landscape of the strategies underpinning what got us to now, people reading about the psychedelic renaissance. But that also had the Faustian bargain/Rumplestiltskin back-end, which was if you're going to go down the medical route, if you are now going to be in the realm of big pharma, drug procedures, development, validation, launch into the healthcare systems of whatever country you're in, and that's going to attract capital, venture capital in this instance.

Once you have for-profit money coming into the system, things are going to behave probably as they do in many, many, many other industries. You end up with, and Rick has said this just recently at South by Southwest, the tech festival in Austin. He basically said at a private dinner that we were at together on behalf of fundraising for MAPS, he said, We were a victim of our own success.

We did such a good job of telling and enrolling this nonprofit story, that we are going to both validate and gain approval for, in this case, specifically MDMA trauma work. Then we're going to be the first, the world's first nonprofit pharmaceutical company with exclusive rights to manufacture and distribute licensed therapeutic use of MDMA.

Then that is going to be this wonderful profit machine, but not in a greedy corporate way, but in a way to then fund and further the impact of all the positive nonprofit activities. Bold model, a really neat subversion, and it had a lot of heartfelt support among the Silicon Valley billionaire philanthropists, Amanda Feildings, and they're around the world. There was that cognizant of baby boomer generation philanthropy and support for this stuff, as well as younger up-and-comers.

As Rick said, we became a victim of our own success by validating this field, and by choosing the medical pharmacological lane to both tell this story and gain traction, we now suddenly, all the light bulbs went on in the venture capital space, and you saw this explosion from 2018 until now of for-profit psychedelic ventures.

And whether that's things like Ketamine clinics, or whether that's pharmacological companies where they're like, Let's tweak a molecule here and there, let's patent it. Compass Pathways is one that you have written about and thought about in the past. There's a whole lot of them. Then the ecosystem shifted, and suddenly all of those wonderful, generous philanthropists who are like, Hey, psychedelics have changed my life. I feel like I want to come out of the closet, I want to be able to support this stuff. You guys are doing the Lord's work, here's a big fat check.

We're suddenly like, Tell me why I don't just invest in one of those for-profit companies and make bank? Why would I just set millions on fire supporting you guys, puny nonprofit? And as a result, not long ago, probably 6 months ago, 9 months ago, MAPS spun out their public benefit company

and renamed it Lycos, which is an ironic name, it being a wolf in Molly's clothing. They've created a for-profit because it was the only way they were able to then go ahead and raise investment, not donation, to then be able to get it across the goal line and get through phase 3 trials and get to market.

[00:09:52] Jamie Wheal

Those things aren't surprising. If you think of the ratchets of corporate governance, fiduciary responsibility, and all of those things. In the US, it's Milton Friedman, the famous/infamous free-market economist at the University of Chicago, that became instantiated in law by 1985, that the sole responsibility of board members, and a company, was to return maximum stockholder value to its owners. Anything less was you could literally be sued, you were liable if you didn't do that.

So you have certain things like that in place, and then these outcomes are not that surprising, that was one. When you see those market dynamics, you realize, Oh, everyone always says it's a catechism, psychedelics in conjunction with talk therapy. Everybody has to say that because that's not raving with your mates at Glastonbury. In conjunction with talk therapy and you realize, Oh, wait, that's a very high touch, delicate, and therefore high cost, not scalable model.

And what you would naturally see in that space, if the number 1 responsibility once we've signed the papers is maximum profitability, in something that's dealing with people's immortal souls, is going to be an erosion of the standard of care down to the puppy mill.

You'll see the telemedicine and COVID accelerating some of this stuff. We ended up with some suspension of rules, and some loosening of rules so that people could now telemedicine, go online, and get Ketamine sent to their house. We'll have a Zoom call, are you okay? Make sure you stay away from sharp objects, and have a friend drive you home, good, good. And let's hope that doesn't go terribly wrong.

Once you've had that as a price point, you can't get back. This is Clayton Christensen at Harvard, he was a very famous Harvard business school professor, and he had this notion of the innovator's dilemma. The innovator's dilemma was you come into a space, you'd create something new, better, and different, that's of usage value to people. Yay, capitalism.

But then you get undercut by incumbents or insurgents who then try to beat you on price at the lower end, and once they've established, once they claim market share there, then they eat your lunch all the way up the value chain. This is Hyundai and Kia, which for years were cheesy knockoff cars and are now breaking into really nicely designed, they poached a few of Tesla's car designers, they're leading on a bunch of things, and now they're owning the middle of the market.

So you can see that innovator's dilemma, that was a big dynamic in market capitalism that psychedelics probably wouldn't be immune to. And sure enough, they haven't been. We've seen a huge collapse in the last 18 to 24 months of a lot of those giddily-funded go-go growth companies. They all piled into the Ketamine therapy space because it was the first one that was legal. They're like, Let's get our feet wet, let's figure out our operations and build an audience in a market.

[00:13:16] Jamie Wheal

Then when MDMA and psilocybin, and all the others come online, then we'll really go huge. Many of them have just been cannibalized by this race to the bottom. Then suddenly, where is the investment the dollars or pounds, and time and space for the dedicated clinicians who are really committed to the serving and healing of people? Where on earth can they afford to do the good work that's necessary?

That's a bit of a meandering tale from 5 to 10 years ago to now, really just saying that when we poured this quicksilver magic of the psychedelic experience into the medical, pharmacological, and market investment space, this is what one would expect. And sadly, it's turned out to be pretty much exactly that with surprisingly few variations, even for the icons in the space like MAPS and their public benefit company.

Alexander Beiner

Really nicely described, thank you. I think especially for someone who wasn't tracking that, which is probably most of our audience, it's a very important to understand what's going on over the last few years.

There's something in what you describe that I'd love to drill into a little bit, which is this narrative around psychedelics that developed, quite intentionally, I've called it the psychedelic Trojan horse of we get it into culture through the medical model, and then once it's in there, it'll open out and all the wonderful countercultural magic will spew into society, which I think is very flawed.

I think there is this juxtaposition between psychedelics as medical tools as they've been. If you read a newspaper article about psychedelics, it's taking that angle very often because that's the culturally accepted, understood, and easy to get across.

I'm curious as to what are your thoughts about what's lost in that narrative because you already mentioned the countercultural, the indigenous, and all these other aspects of psychedelics that until very recently were the main way people understood psychedelics. What do you think? What are some of the things we've lost in this process of medicalization?

Jamie Wheal

All sorts of thoughts on that. I think the first is we've lost any cultural context, any initiatory process, and any sense of maps of meaning-making. Effectively, what are our scriptures around a ritual that used to provide initiation? And that's for 99.9% of all of human existence, that is how, and the only way that humans have ever related to these compounds, and the experiences these compounds typically generate. So to just rip all of that out.

Then you've got medical folks being like, We really need to focus more on integration, which just means, Oh, you blew somebody's world apart with an IV in a clinic with fluorescent lights and a vinyl chair, and you're trying to send them home, and they're having a bit of a hard time going home now. You're like, Oh, we need to build out an integration protocol. We're like, That's called culture, that's called ritual, that's called a rite of passage. We've just ripped all of that up.

[00:16:37] Jamie Wheal

Then more playfully, if anybody remembers the Hunter Thompson book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. He's got a famous opening line, it's like, We were somewhere outside of Barstow, California when the drugs began to kick in. They pick up a hitchhiker, and they're just peaking on whatever the hell they had in their trunk. He's like, Well, when are we going to tell that poor bastard about the bats? No worries he'll see them soon enough.

To me, there's that question, too. In fact, our mutual friend and colleague, Dr Julie Holland, who is a prominent psychedelic therapist and clinician, recently posted something on Twitter about DMT shown to alleviate depression in some patients. And you're like, along with a complete ontological shattering of your reality. If you get a microphone or a recorder stuck in your face half an hour afterwards, you're like, I don't feel so depressed anymore. Wow, my petty concerns are blown out the window during the launch phase.

But then that, capital M more, which I've just been experiencing, can produce euphoria, it can produce senses of liberation, it can produce senses of even just manic excitement of, Oh, my gosh, I was leading a life of quiet desperation, and now the world is enchanted, and I'm a superhero, et cetera, et cetera. Like, fill in the blank of your furthest-out fantasies. But after that initial euphoric uptick comes the realization, Oh, my quiet life of desperation persists, and now I'm not just trying to wrestle with that. How do I make rent? Or pay a mortgage? Or do a job that I don't hate? And raise children that actually love me, and deal with aging parents in a world that seems off the range? Like the human-human.

Now I could also include the bats, and machine house, and anything else. And that is a vastly more complex worldview to sort out and wrestle with, especially if just the day-to-day was getting me down. I think it's the height of, I don't even know what, I mean, naivety, and irresponsibility to think that killing canaries with a cannon is the best way to deal with our suburban mental health issues. I have very, very low confidence that longitudinally, so 5 years, 10 years, developmental arcs of actual people, that that is going to be a magic bullet in the slightest.

Alexander Beiner

I tend to agree with that, especially having been on probably the most intense DMT trials in history, as an extremely experienced psychonaut and then asking, I was obviously curious to the researchers, why are we doing this? Why are we getting to be injected with DMT for 40 minutes? And they were like, Well, for the potential medical benefits in the future, is one of the answers.

And I thought, but the sheer amount of training and philosophy, and everything else that you need to have, to even handle the experience is really considerable. I'm curious to dive into that a little bit, you've written about this, how human beings have actually come into communitas with each other, come into deep connection with each other and ritual.

How might we, let's say best case scenario, start introducing some of that into perhaps not the medical model, but just society more generally? How can we come back to some sense of having initiatory experiences, having ritual experiences with one another, so that we at least get a bit closer to not being in that vinyl chair and then going off back into the suburbs after our minds have been blown?

[00:20:33] Jamie Wheal

That is a million-dollar question, and fools rush in. Where we're having absolutely, it's almost a trope to say, Our men or our boys are suffering because they don't have rights of passage anymore. Our women, let's do period parties for our little girls and let's do moon gatherings, and name it. There's all that in the New Age counter-cultural Druids at Avalon space.

The question is, are the people who are pioneering some of those, or seeing that opportunity, are they the actually best ones? And are the things they're building true and helpful? Because in the past, and this isn't to idealize traditional culture, but it is to say that if nothing else, it iterated slowly. People weren't just making it up out of whole cloth every generation. There was some accumulation of things that worked, and there was some relative stability to a lineage.

It didn't mean it wasn't confining, or constraining, or bigoted, or something. It could be wrong-headed in a thousand ways. But as a cultural meme, they were validated and pressure-tested. Now you can have Goddess circle gatherings where the girls involved might not even know, Riane Eisler and *The Chalice and the Blade*, or Clarissa Pinkola Estes and *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, and Starhawk.

They might not even know, that last generation, which was iterative of stuff from the early to mid 20th-century Gardenarian Wicca, to James Frazer, to Madame Blavatsky. No understanding of any of that. Let alone that even that stuff was made up and derivative of prior ancient traditions. You've just got Insta-Toc therapy and spirituality, masquerading as replacements to grounded former lineage traditions of initiation.

That's all to say, there's this gaping hole most people are aware of that these days. But who's coming in to fill it quite often have sloppy scholarships and perverse incentives. And there's almost always a click on the link below to sign up for my star seed initiation clinic or workshop, or whatever the hell it might be. And you're like, Ahhhh that's not going to get us there either.

My current thinking is, if it's all a lie, pick good ones. And wouldn't it be fun to do some resurrection of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which is the original 19th century super influential story of the sacrificial king? That then influenced Robert Graves. That influenced everybody from Joseph Campbell to Tom Robbins, the popular fiction writer writing about *Jitterbug Perfume* and all these things.

It's in our zeitgeist, it's in our stories, it's shaped so many people, so pick them. Then Robert Graves wrote *The White Goddess*, which is all about the triple goddess, the maiden mother crone. And then that influenced eco-feminism, et cetera. So why not be like, It's all lies/ripping yarns. Pick some good ones that are resonant, and then let's stand up postmodern mystery schools that with a nod and a wink, and an asterisk if you go to the bottom of the page, we know we made this up, but we're doing it on purpose with some style, and a knot and a wink. So they can be functional.

Ken Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and his narrator... And he came, his insight to write it this way came on M-Eslon, he's like, Oh, I'm going to write this narrated by this 6'6 giant American Indian from the Pacific Northwest. His opening story is in an insane asylum, he's writing about lunacy, sanity, and the machine. At the end of it, he goes, And it's the truth, even if it didn't

happen. This feels to me about where we are in our postmodern, post-truth, meaning crisis-y space.

[00:24:47] Jamie Wheal

To then try and assert something is actually true, or literally true, or exclusively true feels like a fool's errand. But to have playful, ripping yarns that work, seems like an infinitely rich, creative, workbench, or play space for us to come together around.

Alexander Beiner

Lovely, nice, I like that. Tacking back psychedelic somewhat for the last thing I wanted to ask you. This is something I've asked quite a few people, normally I ask, what's your hope for the future of this area, the future of psychedelics? I perhaps should ask, what's your hope? And what's the realist in you see happening? Perhaps those things blend together, but I'm curious about that.

Jamie Wheal

Yeah, honestly they do. If anybody hasn't been following this, there are roughly 3 buckets. We've spoken about the medicalization model. The next is the religious model, which is literally church sanctions, nonprofit status, court protections of freedom to worship, and freedom to practice these as sacraments. So that's another category.

Then the third category is so obvious that we often don't name it, which is the underground. If you take a look across all 3, a portfolio analysis of how's this going to go, likely, you can see that the medical investment market-based model is, and already has, given us Prozac Nation 2.0 with new, improved 5HT2A receptor sites, yay. It's carrying on big pharma, medical pathologization of mental health, and serotonergic insertions, just like Prozac, but with a little bit more whiz-and-bang.

We might even engineer out the whiz-and-the-bang so it's purely a biomechanical or neurochemical fix. We are getting Prozac Nation 2.0. It will be denatured, it will be demystified, it will be commodified, it will be scaled, it will be hyper-efficient, it will be largely soulless, and it might work a bit anyway. And if people are wringing their hands and super, super bummed that that's not the Age of Aquarius, and that's not going to save us from our poly-crisis, it never could have or would have. But it's okay. But let's make no bones about where that trends.

Then the middle one is church. And even no sooner had I been like, I think that's probably... I wrote my most recent book, *Recapture the Rapture*, about this, about this meaning collapse, and this rise of new religiosity. As soon as I was tracking that, I was like, Oh, I think what's next is going to be churches. Sure enough, showing up faster than imagined are all of these new psychedelic churches, and quite often by Anglos, by mainstream culture folks, not by Indigenous folks.

And we're seeing... My preference would be, Hey, if you are a member of the mainstream culture, so you have privileged rights and accesses, it really would be a nice thing, and many First Nations and Indigenous tribes and peoples and communities are asking us to do this, which is stay the hell out of our lane, please.

[00:28:15] Jamie Wheal

And that's true in the United States, there's a whole decriminalized nature political program, and it's got the backing of a number of psychedelic advocates, et cetera, et cetera. And the Indian, the American Indian advocates of the Native American Church are saying, Please don't include peyote, our sacred plant, in your decriminalization efforts.

That will blow it open, that will stress the handful of places we can still grow these things that take years to grow. It will flood our zone with a bunch of New Age white folks coming in, and strip mining our culture one more time. And we fought really, really hard over centuries of oppression, boarding schools trying to stamp out our faith. We created this. We fought for it. We finally have Supreme Court protections. Please, for the love of God, leave this lane for us, we need it.

That is a heartfelt plea, I would absolutely second that, and it's not happening. We've got tons of big dumb hat-wearing self-appointed Instagram Shamans from Ibiza to Tulum to everywhere else of like, I'm going to be my own guru, and we're just going to be able to party without getting busted by the cops, and we can frame it as a nonprofit, and we're good to go.

So that's going to happen, and it will probably result in a schism, as I've just described, between Indigenous communities of lineage practices, and a whole bunch of folks rushing in, seeking opportunistic refuge/self-aggrandizing positioning of I'm enlightened, I'm the Minister of the Medicines, I'm a guru, I'm whatever.

That's going to likely be a mad spike in cultic tendencies and trainwrecks. So if you see those first two, you're like, well, if the pharmaceutical model gives us Prozac Nation 2.0, and the church model gives us a bunch of gurus with feet of clay, and/or the last gasps of neocolonialism, let's come back and strip-bind the stuff you guys figured out to do in the last 500 years because we're getting a little desperate ourselves. Horrible, let's not do that, but it's going to happen.

Then the final one is just back to where we started, which is the underground. That's honestly where my hope lies because it's where it's always lain. For thousands of years, there have always been the Promethians stealing fire from the gods. There have always been the priests, whether they're wearing black cassocks or men in black suits, the CIA, MK Ultra, or any of these things, or it's simply the powers that be. They're always looking to hunt down and stamp out the the Promethians. And the Promethians go underground, and then they pop up in some other time and place. That has been this persistent story for thousands of years, which is the esoteric underground has always found a way to keep that flame alive.

We've always done it in organic communities, and it's person-to-person, it's nature, it's place, it's emergent, bottoms up, rituals, community, culture, customs. You could take a look at the Grateful Dead as a psychedelic carrier of this for 50 years. They had their own songs, they had their own lyrics, people would print them on T-shirts, they'd put them on bumper stickers, and they traveled around the world following them. That was their scripture, they had a litany.

What happens in the second set when the band really gets cracking and everybody's on acid at the same time? There was another funny bumper sticker I saw on a water bottle which was like, Set breaks are weird. Because everybody would drop at the beginning of the show, they'd play the

first 90 minutes and then they'd take a long-ass break. Meanwhile, everyone's peaking and has nothing to do. You're like, Oh, that's funny.

[00:32:03] Jamie Wheal

And then the second set, songs, and stories that lead people home, Burning Man, Boom Fest. There's plenty, I mean, the '90s rave culture had its peace, love, unity, and respect, like pure culture. It's those movements in ones and twos, and small groups of friends, in larger communities that bubble up and inevitably collapse.

To me, it's that ephemeral grassroots human-to-human passing of the torch that I have indefinite hope in, simply because it's got a track record of thousands of years of persisting in the face of all sorts of challenges.

Alexander Beiner

Amen to that, Jamie, thank you for that, I share that vision. I think that's the resilience, it reminds me of the resilience of mycelium. I think people use that metaphor, I think it's apt, it's just this strength underground. So wonderful. Thank you again for joining us.

Jamie Wheal

For sure, great to rap as always Alex.