

Recovery, Magic Mushrooms, and Grief

I had been opioid-free for over two years when my beloved chihuahua, Rico, passed away. I had been dreading this day for nearly a year. He was diagnosed with heart failure, but he had been doing good on a cocktail of medications prescribed by his cardiologist. So when the end came, it wasn't a surprise, but it came faster than I had expected. Rico had been my steady companion for over 11 years, by my side through the roughest decade of my life. As a puppy, he changed me immediately. I started to care less about my career and more about him. He started a cascade of events that led me down a spiritual pathway. I eventually found the courage to face my demons, stop taking my addictive prescription drugs, and begin a life with purpose.

Rico's enthusiasm for life reminded me to "get out of my head and LIVE NOW!" At times, he was the only reason I got out of bed. He was often THE ONLY reason I didn't follow through with my suicidal plans. He was my social lubricant. People are much nicer when you have a cute pup tagging along. We had built a remarkable life together, going on adventures, learning agility, traveling, and so much more. Even when life went off the rails, Rico was my center, my light, and he provided unconditional love.

After taking ibogaine to free myself from opioid dependence, I had a challenging time. Along with post-withdrawal symptoms, I had contracted an intestinal parasite that drained my vitality for several months. I could barely take Rico for a walk around the block; I was so weak. He didn't complain. He snuggled between my legs on the couch, while I streamed everything on TV to pass the time. Before I was treated for the infection, I had lost 20 pounds, started to lose muscle and most of my endurance and strength. It was a long, tedious road back. Months later, just as I began to feel physically and mentally better, the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

It was a difficult time, and with my fragile recovery on the line, Rico once again was my little savior. I was living alone, and my human friends were too afraid to hang out. Rico was my only buddy at times. We took a lot of walks and bike rides. Even with Rico at my side, I suffered severe loneliness. Zoom meetings did not improve the sense of isolation. My meditation center closed, and I found myself falling asleep instead of meditating. If not for Rico, I might have given up. I wasn't thinking about using again, but it was hard to find a reason to keep going.

A year after the pandemic started, I finished my book detailing my experience with ibogaine. As a result of the book, I met people who had been microdosing psilocybin for depression. I was intrigued. I had recurrent bouts of major depression throughout my life. I still suffered from a low mood despite my freedom from opioids. Previously, I had been on Prozac. I did not want to take it again. Prozac had too many side effects, and the withdrawal syndrome was even worse. I read that microdosing psilocybin might be an effective and natural antidepressant. I wrestled with the idea for months. I was a child of the 80's so I had been conditioned to believe that "magic mushrooms" were bad and were potentially addicting.

After researching and reading Michael Pollan's book, "How to Change your Mind," I decided that the misinformation around psychedelics was government-sanctioned PROPAGANDA! The healing potential of psilocybin was now being studied at respected universities. I started microdosing. I took small doses of powder every other day, so there were no psychedelic effects.

I didn't feel much at all at first. However, within a few weeks, I noticed the sky seemed bluer and the clouds whiter. I took off my sunglasses to get a better look. *Why does the grass seem greener?* Something was changing.

I read about how psilocybin heightens awareness. It was subtle but noticeable. After a few months, I noted a slight yet perceptible change in my thinking. I wasn't as pessimistic. I wasn't ruminating as much. After six months, I was not depressed at all. I saw my life with possibilities. I started thinking more "outside the box." After years of working as an employee, I decided to start my own practice to provide a higher quality of care to those struggling with addiction. I wanted to create a model WITH my patients - different and hopefully more effective long-term.

I attribute my optimism to the mushrooms. It was no coincidence. I looked at it this way, before mushrooms, I had a set of beliefs, with many of them negative and foreboding. After the mushrooms, I could see opportunities, and I was not concerned about failure. I had to try! During this time, I recovered physically from the hell that was opioid withdrawal and an intestinal infection. At 54, I could honestly say I was physically and emotionally the best I had ever been. Little did I know, life was about to throw me a curveball.

POW! My worst nightmare was upon me. I had to put Rico down. His health had declined quickly over a month. It wasn't just his heart. He had been self-isolating and whining. He was having breathing difficulties due to tracheal collapse. I made the toughest decision of my life – to free my beloved Rico from his suffering. After he was euthanized, I didn't want to leave him. My best friend was gone. I was grief-stricken. I had never felt such all-encompassing pain, guilt, regret, and sadness before. I couldn't speak his name without crying.

It's said the opposite of addiction is connection. So, instead of isolating myself, I shared my grief with others. I talked to my friends and my neighbors. I received an overwhelming amount of support. I didn't hold back my grief. I spoke to a therapist. I had a memorial for Rico. I wrote a letter to him celebrating our life together. After three weeks, I was slowly improving when I found his favorite ball behind my bedroom door. I fell to my knees, sobbing out loud, and this lasted for hours. It was a whole-body experience of grief. I had been grieving for weeks – with the usual denial, bargaining, and intellectual gymnastics of "could I have done more?" This outburst was something primal, pure anguish.

The physical release of my pain was how I broke through to the other side. I got out of my head. I was sad and heartbroken but didn't spiral into a depressive episode. (*Thanks again to the mushrooms!*) I didn't think of using anything to quell my sadness. I felt it wholly and thoroughly. I remembered the quote, "The best way out is always THROUGH," by Robert Frost. It's true. Instead of numbing with substances, I embraced the pain in its entirety. The pain was there because we had LOVED. Approaching grief in this way was challenging, but in the end, I was able to make it to the other side. I still get choked up when thinking of the beautiful memories of Rico, but I can laugh and smile as well.

There is a famous quote in spiritual circles, as it goes like this, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." It is attributed to the Buddha and other Zen teachers. Before I adopted Rico, I read a lot of spiritual texts about Buddha, books written by the Dalai Lama, and started my

yoga instruction. The quote popped up intermittently, and I was always disappointed when a teacher didn't appear for me. After Rico was gone, I had an epiphany. The teacher I was looking for wasn't human! *It was a dog. A tiny, four-pound chihuahua.* He had been giving me lessons his entire life.

He taught me to live in the NOW. I had never experienced that before meeting him. He taught me to care about something other than myself. I had spent my first 40 years trying to prove myself and protect myself from pain. I had lost out on the joy of life by being too focused on work and my own self-interests. As all dogs do, Rico showed me unconditional love and helped soften my tough exterior. I learned to be vulnerable. In his death, his lessons continue. Nothing lasts forever in this *physical plane of existence*, Love or Grief. Rico taught me that grief was inevitable – but not intolerable. However, love never really dies.

Thank you, Rico.