



# Why I Stopped Doing Ayahuasca and Started Paying Attention

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About a decade ago, I drank ayahuasca in a ceremony. I'd been on a trajectory toward it for a while — years of psychedelics taken with what I told myself were spiritual intentions, a growing involvement with the local hippie scene, the crystal crowd, the singing bowl crowd. Ayahuasca felt like the summit. The ultimate experience. The thing that would crack something open inside me and let the light pour in.

It cracked something open, all right. Just not the way I expected.

## The Ceremony

I won't dramatize the details. The short version: I had a horrible experience. Not the kind of horrible that people romanticize afterward — "Oh, I died and was reborn, it was beautiful." No. The kind of horrible where your nervous system decides it's under genuine threat and you spend the next several years with a piece of that night still lodged in your body.

I carry some PTSD from the experience to this day. When people tell me they're interested in trying ayahuasca, my response is immediate and unequivocal: don't. That shit is no joke. This isn't false modesty or gatekeeping — it's a warning I wish someone had given me with enough conviction to make me listen.

But here's the thing people don't want to hear: it was also enlightening.

They call ayahuasca a "master teacher." In my case, it taught me exactly one thing — I don't like doing drugs. I never touched anything in that range again. Just cannabis. So in a very direct, very expensive, very traumatic way, it worked.

The sledgehammer hit once. I got the message. I hung up the phone.

## The Useful Part

I'm not going to pretend the experience was worthless. It wasn't. Something did crack open. I got a hard reset on certain patterns of avoidance and self-deception that I'd been running for years. There's a reason people seek these experiences — they can blow past psychological defenses that talk therapy takes years to approach.

But the crack is not the work. The crack is the beginning. And this is where almost everyone I watched in that scene got stuck.

## The Trap

Here's what I noticed about the people around me — good people, genuinely seeking something — who stayed in the ceremony circuit: they kept going back. Another ceremony. Another retreat. Another plant medicine. They were chasing the crack, over and over, mistaking the intensity of the experience for the depth of the transformation.

There's something uncomfortable about the psychedelic renaissance when you look at it honestly. A lot of it is people with disposable income paying thousands of dollars for an experience they could approximate by sitting alone with their thoughts for ten minutes — if they could tolerate the silence. But they can't, so they buy the shortcut.

I don't think most people seeking plant medicine are seeking truth. They're seeking an experience that feels like depth. There's a difference. The medicine becomes another product — spiritual consumerism dressed in sacred language. The people who actually get transformed treat it like a one-time event, not a recurring subscription.

## Spiritual Dick-Measuring

The New Age scene I was embedded in turned out to be one of the most status-obsessed subcultures I've ever seen. And I've been in tech, so that's saying something.

People bragging about how many ceremonies they'd sat in. Name-dropping shamans. Comparing plant medicine experiences the way tech people compare conference talks. The competitive energy was identical to every other status game I'd seen — just wearing different clothes.

The irony killed me. People who talked constantly about ego death were the most invested in their spiritual identity. The ego hadn't gone anywhere — it had just traded its wardrobe. Instead of a nice car or a GitHub star count, the status symbol was a mala bead collection and a story about that time in the jungle.

I wrote about this dynamic in a different context on my [yoga and meditation](#) page — how the Western spiritual marketplace reduces genuine traditions to consumable experiences. Yoga pants are not yoga. Ceremony attendance is not transformation.

## The Quiet Alternative

The work that actually changes you is quiet. It's private. It looks boring from the outside — no audience, no retreat center with good lighting, no story to tell at the next gathering. That's precisely why it works. The absence of spectacle is the point. If you can sit in silence with nothing flashy happening and still feel connected, you've found something the ceremony circuit can't sell you.

I think about this a lot now in terms of [programming as spiritual practice](#). The daily discipline of writing clean code, of paying attention to how your work shapes other people's experience, of sitting with a hard problem long enough for clarity to emerge — that's contemplative practice. It doesn't look spiritual. It looks like a person staring at a screen. But the quality of attention is identical to what people are chasing in ceremony, just without the fireworks.

The pizzazz is the hook. It's what keeps people coming back to the ceremony instead of doing the boring daily integration that would actually change their lives. Peak experiences are seductive precisely because they feel like progress without requiring the unglamorous daily grind of actually becoming different.

## Stepping Stones, Not Destinations

I want to be careful here. I'm not saying psychedelics are useless. I'm not saying ceremony has no value. I'm saying they're stepping stones, and the tragedy is watching people set up camp on the stepping stone and call it home.

God reveals himself in unexpected places. That's been my experience. Not in the ceremony — in the ordinary Tuesday morning. In [studying Scripture](#) with genuine curiosity instead of performative devotion. In the structure of a well-designed API. In music theory. In honest conversations with people who aren't trying to impress me.

It reminds me of people who try to live good lives and follow the rules specifically to get to heaven — which is the opposite of what the Bible teaches. You should do it because it's inherently good, not to serve a personal purpose. Heaven is a side effect of right living, not the goal of it. The same applies to spiritual experiences: connection with God is a side effect of paying attention, not a product you can purchase at a retreat center.

Chasing the same spiritual fireworks over and over starts to look a lot like refreshing your notifications — intermittent reinforcement in sacred packaging.

## Where I Am Now

I find God in clean code. In the moment a melody resolves. In the King James English of a psalm I've read fifty times that suddenly hits different. In the silence between thoughts when I'm not trying to manufacture a mystical experience.

None of this is impressive. None of it would make a good Instagram story. I don't have a shaman's name to drop or a ceremony story that makes people's eyes go wide.

What I have is a practice. Daily, quiet, boring, and real. The kind of practice that doesn't need an audience because the audience was never the point.

The ayahuasca taught me that. Painfully, expensively, and with lasting scars — but it taught me. I just wish I could have learned it the cheap way: by sitting still and paying attention.

Most of us can. We just don't want to, because sitting still doesn't feel like anything is happening. And we've been trained — by algorithms, by consumer culture, by the spiritual marketplace itself — to mistake intensity for meaning.

The quiet is where the meaning lives. It always has been.