

# PANINI AND PSILOCYBIN

Bridget Verhaaren

“Pretty girls don’t buy cocaine,” Greta<sup>1</sup> says and laughs as she walks out the front door.

My hands and face sting as I stand frozen in the entryway and hear her start the car. I’d asked my twenty-two-year-old daughter where she got the money to feed the addictions she was battling.

Over the past three years, she’d chosen a few subpar boyfriends who introduced her to substances, which helped set her on a devastating trajectory. One I’d never suspected.

As a young mother, I worked hard to protect her from the dragons who dared approach.

As a middle-aged mother, I lay awake in bed, tormented by the realization that she’d lowered the drawbridge and invited them into the castle.

I lie on the family room floor, chest constricting.

How are we here?

In the last year . . .

I ruptured my plantar fascia and wore a walking boot for four months. Our nephew committed suicide. My husband, Gary, and I coordinated the aftermath; the funeral and then the sorting, donating, cleaning, and selling of the house—that no one, but us, would reenter. Greta checked herself into rehab after receiving a Christmas Day DUI. Karl, our youngest in his senior year of high school, a favored national ski team athlete, suffered an early season-ending concussion. Our mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Before my plantar fascia ligament healed completely, I broke the same foot and wore a boot cast for another two months.

---

1. Pseudonym.

A property flooded three separate times, necessitating three separate repairs and remodels. Greta tore *both* ACLs and tendons in her ankle as well as had a tibial plateau fracture—all at the same time. The orthopedist, Dr. Eric Heiden, of speed-skating fame, had never seen this in his career. Our other mother had a shoulder replacement. We committed to visit her twice a day at the rehab facility for the duration, which was seven weeks long. Another child's five-year relationship ended, and the battle to kick a decade-long struggle with alcohol ensued. My foot still didn't heal. Our mother, who had the shoulder replacement, fell and broke her hand, femur, and hip. More surgeries, and she was in a rehab facility again. This time for fourteen weeks. Her hand had to be rebroken and cast because it wasn't healing right. Greta, who was already going to physical therapy for her ACL replacements, was a passenger in her friend's SUV when they were rear-ended at a stoplight by a tow truck going 50 miles per hour. Her head shattered the windshield before the seatbelt caught her or the airbag deployed. More therapy. Physical therapy. Concussion therapy. Neuro-ophthalmologist therapy. The dissolution of my parents' 55-year marriage. And after six months of a broken foot and a year of intermittent walking boot casts, I finally had surgery on my injured foot.

This is not my favorite year.

Gary and I have five aging parents, eight children between the ages of eighteen and thirty, three daughters-in-law, and four grandchildren.

We are facing caring for aging parents while raising children in a day of “extended childhood.”

This year has been a period of increased pressure on our “sandwich” season of life, and we're getting “panini'd.” According to one report, “62% of panini generation caregivers feel they have to choose between being a good parent or being a good daughter or son. . . . And the majority (59%) don't know where to turn for support.”<sup>2</sup>

---

2. Home Instead, “The Panini Generation: Today's Sandwich Generation Faces Increased Pressure,” PR Newswire, Sept. 8, 2022, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-panini-generation-todays-sandwich-generation-faces-increased-pressure-301620094.html>.

It feels like we are failing on *all* fronts.

We are each well acquainted with grief.

Gary is a palliative care physician who walks his patients to the end of their lives. He deals with death and dying daily. He knows loss. He knows grief. He knows hard.

I've experienced grief after the stillbirth of my daughter, Ava, and after the sudden, unexpected death of my first husband, Rob. My griefs were community griefs. This type of grief is awful and beautiful all at once. Everyone knows of your loss. They are watching you, praying for you, and mourning with you. And I got to see people's most beautiful sides that I didn't know existed.

Silent grief is different than community grief. One is all alone.

After Greta disclosed her sexual assaults to us, both Gary and I were catapulted to a place void of light. We circled each other morning and night for months, alternating roles of rage and anguish.

I thought I knew deep sorrow and grief.

I did.

I do.

And now, I know silent grief. And it is shattering.

Throughout my life, I've mitigated seasons of darkness with adrenaline, a byproduct of running, cycling, or other physical outdoor activities that I love. For an entire year, I've been limited by pain and patience to let my foot heal. I could not get the adrenaline needed to ward off the enveloping murkiness.

Gary and I were both in survival mode, retracting. We resisted spending time with extended family and friends. Our emotions were too close to the surface.

At my annual gynecologist well-woman visit, I filled out a mental health survey, a reckoning of sorts, and realized I'd been in this inky pit for more than six months, and I was no closer to climbing out. I sat on the exam table, unable to stop crying. I needed help. My physician prescribed the antidepressant Wellbutrin, which worked well, but what was the endpoint? How long do I use the crutch?

Long term, I needed a perspective change, not an antidepressant. And my environment didn't look like it would change anytime soon.

I researched ketamine clinics, which possess excellent qualities for treating PTSD and depression, but this did not feel right for me.

I knew my husband had recommended psilocybin treatments for some of his terminal cancer patients dealing with existential grief. I wanted to know more. I wanted to know if psilocybin “magic mushrooms” could help me.

A search on [clinicaltrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov) revealed 189 trials using psilocybin. I discovered that multiple universities were conducting psilocybin studies, including the University of Utah Huntsman Cancer Institute, which was conducting a study of psilocybin in patients with cancer, and John Hopkins University, which was conducting a study of psilocybin treatment for major depression. Legal in Oregon, Colorado, parts of California, Massachusetts, Michigan, Washington State, and Washington, DC, and now approved in Utah for “doctors at Utah’s two biggest health care systems,” psilocybin is an option to treat patients.<sup>3</sup>

I’m active in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

The Word of Wisdom is just that—wise words to live healthier spiritually and physically.

I don’t drink coffee, tea, or alcohol. However, I’ve been inadvertently subjected to alcohol twice in my life. Once through an uncooked pasta sauce and a second time during a six-month culinary program while tasting a poached pear. I didn’t realize it was poached in Grand Marnier.

I avoid using anything that can be addictive.

I read. I studied. And I prayed to know if psilocybin therapy was right for me.

I read in Doctrine and Covenants 89:10–11: “And again, verily I say unto you, all *wholesome herbs* God hath ordained for the constitution,

---

3. Paighen Harkins, “Utah Quietly Legalizes Psilocybin, MDMA for Mental Health Treatment at these Hospitals,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, Mar. 21, 2024, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2024/03/21/psilocybin-mdma-treatments-could/>.

nature, and use of man—Every *herb* in the season thereof; and every fruit in the season thereof; all these to be used with prudence and thanksgiving.”

I wondered, are mushrooms herbs?

According to research in the journal *Molecules*, mushrooms are considered herbs.<sup>4</sup>

In Alma 46:40–41, I read: “And there were some who died with fevers, which at some seasons of the year were very frequent in the land—but *not so much so with fevers, because of the excellent qualities of the many plants and roots which God had prepared to remove the cause of diseases to which men were subject by the nature of the climate*—But there were many who died with old age; and those who died in the faith of Christ are happy in him, as we must needs suppose” (emphasis added).

It seemed to me that herbs, plants, and roots, under the correct circumstances, could be helpful.

Fiona Givens said, “Woundedness *is* the universal human condition.”<sup>5</sup>

I prayed to know if psilocybin treatment was right for me to help heal my woundedness. I want to live a healthier life, dying in old age, dying in the faith of Christ. In Moroni 10:5, we’re taught, “By the power of the Holy Ghost, ye may know the truth of all things.” After I put forth the effort, I received the personal revelation I sought to know—how to best heal during my mortal journey.



---

4. Grace Gar-Lee Yue, Clara Bik-San Lau, and Ping-Chung Leung, “Medicinal Plants and Mushrooms with Immunomodulatory and Anticancer Properties—A Review on Hong Kong’s Experience,” *Molecules* 26(8), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8068888/>.

5. Fiona Givens, “The God Who Weeps,” Faith Matters Restore Conference, October 2023.

In August 2023, Gary drove me to meet with my guide, Bertie.<sup>6</sup> I'd met with her a few times while building our relationship of trust. I'd read that the "set and setting" were imperative to a positive experience.

"You're giddy," Gary said as we approached her door. He was right. I was looking forward to what I envisioned would be a meditative experience. I'd set an intention of wanting to embrace an abundance mentality. I was weary of my scarcity default. I was impulsive, too much reacting to reactivity.

Gary kissed me goodbye as Bertie invited me inside. She asked if I wanted to begin outside or inside. Bertie had created a hygge space (Danish cozy), and I thought it would be the perfect place to begin.

I sat down on the rug and leaned against the turquoise-colored couch. Dried mushrooms sat in ziplock bags on the coffee table. I poked the mushroom through the plastic, and it felt like an ordinary shriveled-up mushroom—not a mind-altering mushroom.

Bertie used a moderate dose of two grams. She asked if we could begin with a prayer. I listened as she asked God to help me work through the things I needed to in my brain.

Bertie worked the mortar and pestle to grind the gumby-like dried mushrooms that resisted being ground down to a fine powder. I watched as she put the pieces into a cup and added water and a fruit flavor to mix the unmixable. She handed the glass to me. I choked down the muddy drink with tones of citrus.

I asked how long it would be until I began to feel the effects. "Twenty minutes," she said.

I reclined on the floor next to the coffee table. Bertie dimmed the lights and played some instrumental music on her phone. At first, I embraced my body relaxing. I began to feel too relaxed. I couldn't feel myself breathing. I focused on my breath and thought if I stopped paying attention, my breath would leave me. Fear consumed me as my fingers, toes, and face tingled.

---

6. Pseudonym.

Bertie dialed Gary and said, “We need you now.”

I hunched forward on the couch, saying, “Please, please, Gary, don’t be late. Please hurry.” My lips felt numb.

Bertie called Gary again and asked where he was. I could tell she was stressed because her voice was monotone. There was an albuterol inhaler on the table in front of me. Could it save me? Then she told him she had an EpiPen, and I thought—“this is it.”

I finally heard the door open. Gary! He used his calm doctor voice to distract me as he checked my pulse. He reassured me my breathing was normal and asked if I wanted to lie on his lap. I clung to him, wrapping my arms around his thigh. Classic panic attack.

He draped his arm around me, and I loosened my grip. I trusted Bertie. And I needed Gary, too.

I closed my eyes and saw a purple balloon that had lost most of its air.

I began to cry. I didn’t want to, and I didn’t know why I was crying. No. No. No. This was ruining everything. I’d come for an abundance mentality. I was tired of too many tears. They wouldn’t stop. They kept coming. I sat up, hoping to quell their flow. No go—more tears followed by copious amounts of snot. Now, I really couldn’t breathe. I sat up to blow my nose. Embarrassed, I rested my head on Gary’s lap again and closed my eyes. I saw the purplish balloon still floating above me.

Then, I saw a faint white hue before me, like a dissipating mist. As I continued to cry, dark blue-black shapes emerged at the bottom and became like oil in water, floating higher and higher, becoming lighter in color as they rose. Black turned to navy, then to cobalt, and finally purple.

I realized I was underwater.

It occurred to me that I could describe what I was seeing aloud to Bertie and Gary.

The tears became sobs, and I had to sit up many times to blow my nose to breathe. Each time I lay back down, more layers of dark blue shapes emerged from a deep, bubbling spring.

I didn't know how much sadness was inside of me.

For the most part, the sorrow wasn't correlated to specific events; it was a purging of sheer emotion until I finally wept that I wasn't fully present at my children's births. I'd missed out on the most beautiful experience with each of them, welcoming them to the world. I'd been less excited about their arrival and more relieved to end my intense illness—hyperemesis gravidarum, which is the fancy way of saying I vomited all day, every day during every pregnancy.

I closed my eyes again, and deeper layers of blue bubbled to the surface. I cried until there were no more tears. Releasing sorrow was exhausting. Ironically, I had to get closer to sadness to let it go.

Finally, I felt a deep sigh within my body. I lay on the couch, wholly relaxed. Then, my body began to tingle, including my nethers. But not in a sexual way. I opened my eyes and erupted with a laughter I had not known in years.

The colors of everything surrounding me were vibrant. The inanimate blue coffee table was dynamic, alive with color. The hummingbirds drinking sugar water from the feeder flapped their wings in slow motion. I could see and hear their flutters.

If I closed my eyes, I was in one world. When I opened them, I was in another, and neither was my world. The edges of my vision were fuzzy, like developing film.

More laughter. When I closed my eyes this time, the right side of my vision was brilliant red with fuchsia polka dots. I told Gary and Bertie I don't usually like that color combination, but it was so beautiful! The left side was an intense kelly green, also with fuchsia polka dots, and in the center, they merged into a giant constant firework of bright light.

"They're talking to each other! Your right and left brain are communicating," Bertie said.

The corpus callosum of our brain is a wall separating the right and left brain that prevents accessible communication between the two sides.



Functional MRI studies show that on psilocybin, the left and right brain communicate freely. “A brain region called the claustrum may be at the center of all of this,” Fred Barrett, a neuroscientist at Johns Hopkins University, said. The claustrum is a set of two slight strips of gray matter—one tucked deep inside each brain hemisphere—that are connected to almost every other region of the brain. Francis Crick (of DNA fame) and neuroscientist Christof Koch suggested in 2005 that the claustrum’s position and connectedness made it a likely “conductor of consciousness.” Barrett compared it to a switchboard that tells other brain regions to turn on and off in response to changing stimuli. He said, “Different regions of the brain can interact in radically different ways. Networks that normally don’t turn on at the same time may turn on and stay on, and they begin to fight for control. And other brain networks that would normally be involved in emotions or memories are firing on and off in an unpredictable fashion.”<sup>7</sup>

I felt my logical left brain had finished sorting through the highly charged negative emotions in my right brain and discarded those that no longer served me.

Bertie suggested I walk out onto the grass barefoot. I don’t do that. I was raised in Arizona and feared stepping on a scorpion. I relented. Weak and devoid of energy, Gary walked me to the lawn. I knelt on the verdant green grass where I saw the tiniest little white mushroom and burst into laughter.

The flowers in the garden seemed to shout “Look at me!” with their hot pink and bright orange petals. The cauliflower bushes near the deck appeared to shapeshift, moving back and forth from big bunches to little bunches.

Gary lay down on the grass. I crawled over to him, rested my head on his stomach, and curled my body into a fetal position right up next

---

7. Alissa Greenberg, “How Do Psychedelics Work? This Brain Region May Explain Their Effects,” *Nova*, Oct. 19, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/psychedelic-brain-effects-claustrum/>.

to his. He put his fingers together behind his head so we could see one another.

The setting sun shone through the shimmering green leaves of the cottonwood tree until it slipped behind the glowing red barn. The brilliant blue sky was painted with wisps of cirrus clouds.

Gary looked older, maybe thirty years older. His hair was all white. His skin was mottled with sunspots. I asked if I could put my hand on his heart. I snaked my hand through his shirt onto his skin and felt his heartbeat. We were one. This felt primordial.

Connection. One I'd felt before. The fleeting moment when my children were infants lying on my chest, craning their necks, eyes peeping up at me to follow the sound of my familiar voice.

I didn't want our joyful soul-seeing moment to end. I willed myself to keep my swollen eyes open. I count this as one of the most sacred experiences of my life.

Dr. Bessel A. van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, wrote, "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to a meaningful and satisfying life."<sup>8</sup>

Psilocybin therapy felt like a decade of cognitive behavioral therapy in four hours. The beauty of psilocybin therapy is that it allowed my undiluted emotions to flow freely without being correlated to specific traumatic events I had to relive. I didn't have to put forth the effort of finding and using words to describe my emotions and experiences from multiple vantage points—as my older, wiser self, the voice of experience reflecting on my younger self, and the voice of innocence, who she was, and what she thought then.

---

8. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015). Quoted on <https://www.besselvanderkolk.com/resources/the-body-keeps-the-score>.

My logical brain looked at emotional situations and saw them without emotionality. After my treatment, I could step outside my looping thoughts, sidestepping landmines, to see which thoughts were serving me and which were not. I was able to discard much of the detritus of pathological grief. I can now look back at my younger self with more love and empathy.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl wrote, "Between the stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space lies our freedom and power to choose our responses. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."<sup>9</sup>

For me, psilocybin therapy increased the space between stimulus and response. I regained that space, allowing me to be more thoughtful in determining how I will respond to events and emotions.

When faced with the ripple effects of agency wielded by others, "Now what?" has been my default response for far too long. I'm now closer to replacing it with "And here we are." I am present and more capable of loving people where they are—and it's still hard.

---

9. Attributed to Frankl by Sharon Ravitch, "Space between Stimulus and Response: Creating Critical Research Paradises," Sage Research Methods Community, Mar. 11, 2020, <https://researchmethodscommunity.sagepub.com/blog/space-between-stimulus-and-response-creating-critical-research-paradises>.

BRIDGET VERHAAREN {bridget.verhaaren@vcfa.edu} is married to Dr. Gary Garner. Together they have eight children. She has a BA in English from Brigham Young University and an MFA in creative nonfiction from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Ms. Verhaaren's essays have been published in the *Write Launch*, *Herstry*, *Exponent II*, *Streetlight Magazine*, *Solstice Magazine*, *Sonora Review*, the *Season* (Center for Latter-Day Saint Arts), and *Segullah*. She has a forthcoming essay in *Segullah*.