

ATW-33

Mushroom Hunting in Oregon II: But What Do They Nourish?

Tucson, Arizona

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

During my stay in Oregon in the fall of 1973 I ate wild mushrooms almost every day, sometimes three times a day, usually as main courses. Perhaps because I do not eat meat I am particularly sensitive to the meaty nature of cooked mushrooms. They resemble animal flesh much more than anything vegetable, and I find them quite satisfying as the principal component of a meal. When I was eating so many wild mushrooms, I was happy, healthy, and creatively productive. Mushrooms filled my senses and thoughts and imagination. I spent many hours in the company of people who were similarly involved with mushrooms, some of them people with whom I had nothing else in common. Mycophilia cuts across all social, cultural, age, and class lines, forging real bonds of communication between otherwise disparate individuals. Mushroom consciousness is high in the Pacific Northwest, as it is also in northern California, Colorado, New England, Michigan and Minnesota, and a few other parts of the country. Mushrooms abound in those regions along with mushroom fanatics who hunt them down.

The desire to hunt mushrooms embodies the thrill of any sort of chase. But in the case of mushrooms, the chief object of the hunter is to eat the quarry rather than to kill it. In view

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of the intensity of cravings that some of us experience for mushrooms it is puzzling to read nutritional analyses of them, for nutritionists make mushrooms out to be very uninteresting. According to them, mushrooms contain only 66 calories per pound, mostly as protein, along with trace minerals and vitamins. This information leads many people to conclude that mushrooms have little worth as food and are merely useful as flavorful garnishes. I once questioned a naturalist in Glacier National Park about the occurrence of morels in his territory. Morels are the most prized of all wild mushrooms; they grow in early spring, and words cannot possibly do justice to their excellence. The naturalist, who had never eaten them, replied, "I hear they are delicious, but they don't have any nutritive value."

Now, the question of the food value of mushrooms really is a question about the energy content of mushrooms, for calories are a measure of available energy. Nutritionists are saying that mushrooms contain very little energy relative to other foodstuffs. Yet it is clear to me that mushrooms are high in some kind of energy.

In the previous newsletter I mentioned eating Shaggy Manes (Coprinus comatus). These delicate mushrooms are members of the Inky Cap group, distinguished by their peculiar habit of melting into inky-black liquid as the spores mature. Shaggy Manes come out of the ground overnight in bunches that look just like white eggs. They elongate rapidly and may be a foot above ground by mid-morning. And by the end of the day there may be nothing left of them but a puddle of black liquid on the ground. This tendency to dissolve away is related to their high water content, which makes them tricky to handle. They must be gathered quickly, taken home, and cooked almost immediately. Any delay or mishandling in their preparation will leave you with a puddle of black liquid in your kitchen. But these fragile mushrooms come out of the ground with such relentless force that they can push up asphalt. If a driveway is laid over one of their fruiting spots, it can

be broken up by the emerging mushrooms. That is evidence of energy, and it is documented in numerous photographs.

Once in suburban Washington, D.C. in mid-October I found an enormous mass of brilliant orange mushrooms bursting from the stump of a dead tree on a residential street. Each cap was six inches across on a long stalk that joined many others at the base. There must have been well over a hundred in the mass. I gathered an armful, took them home, and pored over my mushroom books in hopes of making an identification. I was in luck because they were so distinctive in their appearance and habit of growth. They were the Jack-O'Lantern Mushroom (Clitocybe illudens or Omphalotus olearius), and my book told me they should glow in the dark. I took a large cluster of them into a dark room. To my delight the underside of each cap glowed with a brilliant blue luminescence; the light of the whole cluster was considerable. That is energy.

Mushrooms that can kill people provide further evidence. Most of the deadly species are in the genus Amanita. They are large, beautiful mushrooms with white gills and pleasing tastes. They contain chemical compounds not found elsewhere in nature that poison the most basic processes of cellular metabolism, leading to death through destruction of liver and kidney tissue. There is no antidote for their effects, and the mortality may be over fifty per cent even in hospitalized cases. Symptoms do not appear until 12 to 36 hours after ingestion, making it impossible to remove any of the toxic material from the stomach. The devastating effects of deadly Amanitas on the human organism give us another clue to the nature of mushroom energy. That energy, represented in certain unusual molecules, can overwhelm the balance of life.

Other mushrooms, mostly little ones in the genus Psilocybe, can precipitate us into the most profoundly different states of consciousness that can be utterly terrifying or inexpressibly

beautiful. Anyone who has experienced their power will not dispute the statement that mushrooms are highly energetic things.

What nutritionists ought to be saying, then, is that mushrooms contain insignificant amounts of the energy they can measure. The kind of energy measured by nutritionists, caloric energy, comes from the sun. Calories are simply units of solar energy that has been bound by green plants or chemically transformed by animals that have eaten green plants. Mushrooms have nothing to do with the sun. In fact, they are destroyed by sunlight and are best gathered in early morning before the light of day is too intense. Human societies in all parts of the world have associated mushrooms with the moon. This association is not fanciful. Friends of mine who lived near the Colombian village of Silvia in the state of Cauca tell me that the growth of San Ysidro mushrooms there was clearly correlated with phases of the moon: a new crop would appear each time the moon waxed, disappearing just after the full.

Many people also associate mushrooms with water, the feminine or lunar element, as opposed to fire, which is masculine and solar. Not only do mushrooms contain high percentages of water, their growth is triggered primarily by rain. When I have picked mushrooms in wet forests on misty mornings after fall rains, they have often seemed to me to be entirely creations of water.

Some years ago, before I had met many wild mushrooms, I came across a line in a macrobiotic cookbook that made no sense to me. It was: "Mushrooms are about as yin as you can comfortably get," and the book warned against eating many of them. I was vaguely familiar with the Chinese concept of yin and yang as the fundamental dualism in the Universe, but I could not picture any scale of foodstuffs on which mushrooms were so far towards one end that they were dangerous to eat.

More recently I met a young woman in Marin County, California who told me she had survived serious poisoning by the Panther

Amanita (A. Pantherina). Panther Amanitas look like Fly Amanitas, but the color of the cap is tan instead of red. I asked her for details of her experience. She said she had been living with a man in the far north of California with little money and little food. One day two "beautiful brown mushrooms the size of baseballs" came up on their lawn. Knowing nothing about mushrooms, they decided these were a "gift from heaven."* She picked them, sliced them, and fried them with onions. They tasted good. Thirty minutes after eating the dish she felt "sicker than I ever felt in my life -- not just in my stomach but all through my body." She next experienced a "vivid awareness of my life processes shutting down from the outside in" until all that was left was a tiny kernel of consciousness. Then that flickered out, and she regained awareness in a hospital. She and her friend had been found unconscious and been taken for medical help. Their stomachs were pumped, and with support of vital functions, they were ready for discharge 24 hours later. "I couldn't look at a mushroom again for six months," she told me.

As this woman recounted her adventure I had a sudden flash of illumination about the warning in the macrobiotic cookbook. For one of the classic descriptions of the yin force is "contraction toward a center," as opposed to "expansion from a center," which is yang. The Panther Amanita had overwhelmed her organism with a heavy dose of yin energy, the dark lunar force that kills by inward reduction to a dimensionless point. That is death by water. Panther Amanitas, producing symptoms rapidly, seldom if ever kill, although they can be very toxic. The truly deadly Amanitas like the Destroying Angel, do not cause noticeable effects until their yin energy is disseminated through the body.

Mushrooms are primal symbols of the lunar force. I do not mean simply that they represent it but that they actually embody

*It is curiously appropriate that the word Gift in German means "poison."

it, and here, I think, is the real basis for the fear of mushrooms that crops up again and again among human beings. A Mexican term for mushrooms is carne de los muertos, "flesh of the dead." In fact, cemeteries are good collecting grounds for mushrooms. Besides bringing death, the lunar force can cause madness (lunacy), and in the case of psilocybin mushrooms, the symbolism holds true.

Now, it is clear that many persons regard manifestations of lunar energy as evil. Death and madness are commonly considered evils that afflict mankind. Night, the full moon, and female witchcraft are a sinister trio. But it should be obvious that the dark side of existence is integrally part of things. Night and day make up one cycle of existence. Life without death is unthinkable. The moon and sun in the sky are outward expressions of the complementary interaction of the opposite forces of the Universe.

In human experience, lunar forces manifest themselves in the life of the unconscious: in dreams, intuitions, trances, and all states of consciousness where what is normally hidden from awareness breaks through. We cannot possibly do away with those forces in the outside world because we carry them around within us. It is even possible that external manifestations of those forces, such as mushrooms, are really projections or creations of our internal energies. Because our mental life is usually dominated by masculine, solar forces, we tend to think of our dark sides as non-existent or evil. Chinese philosophy is very clear on the wrongness of that way of thinking. The I Ching or Book of Changes, which describes the interplay of yin and yang in the world, says of the yin force:

In itself, of course, the Receptive [yin] is just as important as the Creative [yang], but the attribute of devotion defines the place occupied by this primal power in relation to the Creative. For the Receptive must be activated and led by the Creative; then it is productive of good. Only when it abandons this position and tries to stand as an equal side by side with the Creative, does it become evil.

Nutritionists do not see the reality of the lunar energy of mushrooms; measuring the traces of solar energy in them, they conclude that mushrooms are not very nourishing. (If they could measure those silvery-dark forces, what units would they use, I wonder? Lunies?) Macrobiotic faddists come close to regarding mushrooms as dangerous. In yoga dietetics, mushrooms are assigned to the lowest of three energy groups of foods: the tamasic, a category that also includes spoiled and rotten things and other items to be avoided by yogis. Are mushrooms genuinely harmful to aspirants on spiritual paths? Or is it that followers of yoga -- a male-dominated system if ever there was one -- are uneasy about their own lunar natures and project that concern onto mushrooms?

The energy of mushrooms is real and strong: remember, it can push up asphalt, unhinge the mind, kill, and permeate the darkness with eerie, heatless light. Where does that energy go when it enters the body? What does it nourish if not the physical body that requires calories?

I do not think it unreasonable that lunar energy is food for the unconscious, that mushrooms in the diet stimulate the imagination and the intuition. Wild mushrooms are stronger in this respect than cultivated ones, and this line of reasoning explains to me the passionate enthusiasm of mushroomers. I am not suggesting that mushrooms are required for the health of the unconscious or that they are the only means of stimulating the activity of that sphere. But they are a means, and those who feel attracted to them would do well to follow their call.

I once wrote that no line exists between psychedelic and poisonous varieties. From one point of view, mushrooms are simply mushrooms, all of them expressions and embodiments of the basic energy represented by the moon. I doubt that canned mushrooms deliver much of that energy to the mind, but fresh cultivated ones certainly give us some. Chanterelles, Shaggy Manes, Morels, and other choice wild species are higher in lunar nutritive

factors. Psilocybin mushrooms are so rich in them that they can open our normal waking consciousness to experiences that usually remain below awareness. Some Amanitas - the Panther and the Fly -- are so strong that they can make us sick; yet some people use them deliberately to change consciousness. And other Amanitas are too powerful for our beings; they flood the system with fatal doses of yin.

In the next letter I will tell you of some of my experiences in the middle zone of this continuum.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew J. Weil". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'A' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'l'.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on January 16, 1975.