

ATW-34

Mushroom Hunting in Oregon III: On the Trail of the Liberty Cap

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:

Although I satisfied all of my cravings for wild mushrooms in the fall of 1973 and made friends with a great many varieties, I did very poorly at tracking down the psilocybin mushrooms of Oregon. By the 30th of October I had resigned myself to not finding them, and since I was feeling the urge to migrate southward, I packed up my things and made ready to leave for Arizona. On my way out of Eugene I was stopped by a man who introduced himself as Richard, a friend of a friend. He said he knew people on the Oregon coast who were collecting and using psilocybin mushrooms. If I could stay another day, he would drive me to them.

And so, on Hallowe'en in the midst of heavy downpour, four of us drove over the coastal mountains to the gray Pacific, where we met Greg and Susan. They told us they knew a psychoactive mushroom called the Liberty Cap that grew in cow pastures near the coast and said they would be happy to take us to them. The six of us got into a car and drove north through the storm along the coast into Lincoln County, where we turned inland through rich meadows. Susan told us the Liberty Caps had been growing in abundance all month.

"But it's getting late in the year," Greg said, "and it's been cold the past few days. I hope some will be up."

Andrew T. Weil is an Institute Fellow exploring altered states of consciousness in our own society and elsewhere.

I asked them how they had learned about these mushrooms.

"From a friend named Jerry who's a mycology student at Oregon State University. He turned a lot of people down here on to them."

"Are they strong?"

"Wait till you see," Greg replied.

We stopped by a large field that looked partly flooded. It was cold and raw and wet. Greg and Susan got into their rain gear. I had not yet learned how to dress like a proper Oregonian and was soaked through within minutes of our descent from the road to the inevitable barbed-wire fence. It was hard to believe that mushrooms would be growing in such inclement conditions.

The six of us fanned out through the sodden field with instructions to show any likely mushrooms to Susan or Greg. In some places the grass was under several inches of cold rainwater.

"Winter's really here," Richard said.

"Yup," someone replied, and we walked on, our eyes scanning the ground. I found a patch of little mushrooms half under water and took them to Susan. They were not the right kind. But soon after, Susan shouted, "Over here!" and gestured to everyone to come.

"Here they are," she said happily. "Oh, I'm so glad; I was afraid we wouldn't find any." She indicated several little mushrooms growing in a small group. At first glance they were quite uninteresting. Their color was dingy gray-brown, and they were barely distinguishable from the tall grass in which they grew.

"Liberty Caps?" I asked.

"Yes," Susan answered, and she knelt down smiling to pluck them reverently.

Up close, the little mushrooms were more distinctive. For one thing, I had never seen caps of that particular shape: gently

conical with a pronounced point or nipple at the top. The flesh of the cap was so thin that it was translucent to light, especially near the margin; the wet, outer surface was glistening and slimy. There were clear vertical striations around the margin. The stipe (stem) had an elastic pliancy that allowed the mushroom to be flopped back and forth without breaking it. The caps were about a half-inch in diameter at the broadest point, on three-inch stipes. I found it hard to believe that such tiny, delicate mushrooms could be so powerful. The psilocybin mushrooms I knew from Latin America were robust and fleshy.

"How many of them do you eat?" I asked.

"I like to eat 20," Greg said. "I've eaten up to a hundred."

"What's that like?"

"Well, you lie on the ground unable to move for a couple of hours. It's O.K. But 20 is a good solid dose."

"Sometimes, I'll just eat two or three," Susan said, "on a really nice day, in the morning. I like to trip on them, too, but just a few in the morning make you feel really alive. All the colors of everything stand out, and your body feels energized."

"Well, let's find some more," I suggested.

We broke up again and roamed over the field through puddles and lakes. Soon, other people began to find Liberty Caps, although, as usual, I had trouble seeing them for some time and could only notice them if I were walking near Greg or Susan.

"It looks like there will be enough for all of us to get high," Greg said. "We may as well eat them." The collection thus far was divided up, and we each got about six Liberty Caps. I chewed on mine slowly, savoring their strongly wild mushroom flavor. Then I set about gathering more. Before long I began to notice Liberty Caps -- one here, one there. I ate them as I found them. Then I came across a group of five, completely submerged. I

called Greg's attention to them.

"They must have come up yesterday," he commented. "The field probably started to flood last night when the heavy rain came. I'm afraid this might be the last of them for the year."

"Have you been collecting them all along?" I asked.

"Since the end of September, pretty regularly. Just two days ago some friends came down from Eugene, and we picked a couple of pounds in this field."

"A couple of pounds?! That must be a lot of Liberty Caps."

"It was."

Soon I had eaten 25 of the tiny mushrooms. I was soaked to the skin but excited enough not to notice. As I found new mushrooms I put them in a plastic container.

Gradually I became aware of a strange sensation in my stomach, a sort of buzzing vibration that grew slowly in intensity. It was not at all unpleasant, and I knew at once it was the mushrooms. Over the next ten minutes this unusual feeling became stronger, filling my abdomen. Then it began to invade the rest of my body, pushing outward through the muscles to the extremities. I was distinctly aware of a subtle but powerful energy vibrating through the musculature of my whole body. It made me feel warm and strong. As it reached my head, my senses sharpened, and I found myself admiring qualities of the wet pasture I had ignored until then. The green of the grass was of glowing intensity, highlighted by tones of brown and red. The smell of the earth and rain was overpowering. I had no desire to move. If the ground had been dry, I would have stretched out and rolled in the grass.

Our little group slowly drew together. Obviously, we were all feeling the effects of the mushrooms. We moved slowly and gracefully, swinging our arms and laughing at each other. The laughter seemed to bubble up from inside, and the sound of it echoed inside my chest. I was also very conscious of the taste of

the mushrooms. It was as strong as if fresh in my mouth but was diffused through my whole body. I felt the taste in my muscles.

The rain picked up in intensity. Clearly, we could not stay out in the field much longer. It was late afternoon and turning colder. Slowly we wended our way out of the pasture, across the fence, and up a steep bank to the car. I curled up in a corner of the back seat as we started to move. It was an hour's drive south along the coast to Greg and Susan's house.

The mushroom energy continued to course around my body. And now it began to pull me away from ordinary awareness into a realm that bordered on sleep but was not sleep. It was an effort to maintain awareness of the car and my fellow passengers, let alone the scenery outside. Instead, I closed my eyes and began to see visions that were somewhere between images in the mind's eye and actual movies projected on the insides of my eyelids. At first there were shadowy patterns that tended to multiply themselves in infinite regressions, but these soon resolved themselves into very clear images of mushrooms. The mushrooms that appeared to me were of one type, not Liberty Caps. They grew in clustered bunches, the stipes arising from a common point, and lacked the Liberty Cap's distinctive peak. They also seemed fleshier and bigger. I had never seen them before. Bunches of these visionary mushrooms appeared out of nowhere, springing up at odd angles, swirling, and receding. They occupied my attention completely.

"Are you all right?" someone in the front seat asked.

"Yes, I'm seeing mushrooms." I opened my eyes for a moment, surprised by the brightness of the outside light. I closed them quickly and was instantly back in the comfortable night world of visions. I felt sorry for the driver and other front-seat riders who were attending to the road and could not watch the interior show.

We arrived at the house without difficulty just as it was

growing dark.

"Are you still seeing mushrooms?" Greg asked me.

I closed my eyes to make sure. "Yes, they're still there."

"A number of people who eat these things see mushrooms," Greg said.

"The ones I'm seeing aren't the ones we ate. I wonder if I'll ever meet up with them. "

I told Greg and Susan that Liberty Caps more than lived up to my expectations and thanked them for introducing me to them. Hallowe'en seemed an especially fitting day on which to meet them.

It was now a stormy Hallowe'en night, and a long ride through the mountains lay between us and Eugene. The visions were subsiding, and I volunteered to drive. It took some concentration to follow the tortuous road through the rain, but we arrived home without incident. I could still feel the vibrational energy in my muscles, though it was fading rapidly. About six hours after I had eaten the mushrooms, I was back to normal, feeling tired. I fell asleep quickly and awoke the next morning refreshed and ready to leave Oregon for the south.

I did not return to the state until April. When I got back I made an effort to find out more about Liberty Caps and eventually got in touch with Jerry, the Oregon State student who had introduced Greg and Susan to the mushrooms. Jerry gave me much useful information about them. He said they appeared to be a species called Psilocybe semilanceata, that like all Psilocybes they had purplish-brown spores, and that like all psychoactive Psilocybes they tended to stain blue on handling or drying, although less so than other varieties. (I had seen no tinges of blue on the ones I ate.) Jerry said further that they appeared only after the Autumn Equinox and continued to grow until the Winter Solstice, despite low temperatures. Their range extended from the California border north into British Columbia, from the ocean

east to the crest of the coastal mountains. Of the active species he had tried, Jerry said the Liberty Caps were his favorites.

I discovered that knowledge of Liberty Caps was not very widespread in Eugene, but that many people who lived near the coast knew how to collect them. A few users told me they were called Liberty Caps because they resembled the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, a resemblance I could not see. I discarded that theory when I received a letter from a friend in Wales telling me that people in that country were getting high on mushrooms called Liberty Caps or Pixie Caps. The letter contained some dried specimens; it was the same mushroom.

Given the fact that inhabitants of the British Isles call this little mushroom the Liberty Cap, it is almost certain that the name comes from the French Cap of Liberty, a symbol of the French Revolution that appears on coins of the period. That symbol, in turn, derives from the Phrygian Bonnet of Roman times, given to slaves upon emancipation. The Oxford English Dictionary describes the Phrygian Bonnet as "a conical cap with the peak bent or turned over in front, worn by the ancient Phrygians and in modern times identified with the 'Cap of Liberty.'" Especially on drying, Psilocybe semilanceata takes on the appearance of this ancient symbol.

I have found reference to this species in one European mushroom handbook and in no American one. The European book called Psilocybe semilanceata a poisonous species. And, no doubt, persons who ate it unawares, without the proper set, would likely interpret the dramatic changes as mushroom poisoning.

I waited patiently through the warm months of last year for the approach of the Fall Equinox. I wanted to find more Liberty Caps, to learn more about their growth habits and properties, and to dry some for future use. Properly dried Liberty Caps retain their activity for at least a year. Expectantly, I made preparations for intensive mushrooming, to begin with hunts

for edibles in mid-September. But the fall of 1974 in the Pacific Northwest was the fall of the Great Indian Summer. Day after day dawned sunny, warm, and dry. The Equinox came and went, October passed by, and no rain fell to bring up mushrooms. In a region where sun is often scarce, it is hard to ask people to hope for rain, but I tried my best. Still no rain fell. The Eugene Mycological Society had to cancel its scheduled mushroom show. Mushroomers all over the west coast went sad and hungry.

Then on October 29th a good storm swept in from the Pacific. The next day it showered off and on, and I made an expedition to the coastal regions of Lincoln County to locations I had learned from friends. A group of us arrived at the fields on the afternoon of the 30th. We tramped around until dark but found none of the magic mushrooms. The 31st dawned cloudy, but throughout the morning the sun played tag with the clouds. It was Hallowe'en again, and I had no doubt that the Liberty Caps would be up. Sure enough, they were. We visited four or five fields and got enough for a dozen excursions into the lunar world.

Collecting them was not all that easy. In many fields, Liberty Caps are sparse, and they hide themselves well in the midst of clumps of tall grass. Sometimes you have to crawl on your hands and knees to spot them, pulling apart the tufts of grass. But that can be a most enjoyable effort, especially when the sun is out, the grass is green and damp with needed rain, and the sky is filled with puffy white clouds. It was a magnificent Oregon day, complete with sprinkles of rain, lots of sunshine, rainbows, a gentle horse that followed us about, even clumps of fresh meadow mushrooms to munch on.

I ate about five Liberty Caps while picking. Soon I felt their energy; it was exactly a year since I last felt it. In a lower dose, it was much subtler, but it enabled me to slow down and concentrate and even to begin seeing more Liberty Caps hidden

in the grass. I am convinced that the ability to see mushrooms is independent of visual acuity. It has much more to do with recognition of a pattern, something that goes on in the higher brain. One can stare at a mushroom, even a large one, and not recognize it. Sometimes I feel the mushrooms themselves decide when and to whom they will reveal their presence.

A glorious sunset brought our day of collecting to a close. The moon was full, and the sky was still streaked with low clouds. We drove back over the mountains to Eugene, carrying our treasure with us. I learned how to dry Liberty Caps best, simply by spreading them on a screen where there is good air circulation. In less than 24 hours they are crisp and dry, their caps crinkly with a metallic sheen. This time I did see streaks of blue on some of them.

Several days later I made another trip to the coast and in one field was able to fill a shoe box with Liberty Caps within a few hours. I came to recognize habitats that the mushrooms seemed to prefer; for instance, they are especially fond of growing near the bases of tall clumps of sedge in actively used cow pastures. It is quite likely that cows eat these mushrooms in the course of their grazing and help propagate them by spreading the spores in their manure. Whether cows experience any effects from them is a moot question.

I was not alone in hunting Liberty Caps last fall. Nearly every time I went out, other groups of hunters would be combing the fields, each with a small plastic box or paper bag. Whenever a car of long-hairs would pass on the road, they would shout and wave and honk their horn, knowing full-well what we were doing. Once an elderly lady stopped her car and called down to us, "What are you doing down there?"

"Picking mushrooms," someone called back.

"What kind of mushrooms grow around that tall grass?" she asked.

"Well, we've been getting some meadow mushrooms."

"They don't grow in that stuff," she said.

"Oh, well, we're just looking to see what we can find."

"Oh." She drove off with a puzzled look. Many local residents are unaware that magic mushrooms are growing in their midst, but as more and more people descend on the coastal fields to hunt Liberty Caps, word will certainly get out. So far, farmers do not seem to mind groups of strange young people traipsing through their pastures, sometimes crawling about on hands and knees with plastic containers. Oregon is a state with a high tolerance for eccentricity.

Although psilocybin is classified as a dangerous drug under Federal law and is illegal to possess in all states, no laws exist against the mushrooms in natural form. Some magic mushroom hunters in Florida and the Gulf South have been arrested for trespassing, but I know of no cases of prosecution for possession of the mushrooms. A friend who arrived from British Columbia reported that Liberty Caps had emerged there, too, and were being hunted and consumed widely with some publicity in the newspapers. Yet no one made a fuss.

Over the past few months I have experimented with Liberty Caps a number of times and improved my methods of using them. I find them better dried than fresh and suspect that some mildly toxic constituents disappear on drying. They are best taken as a tea made by steeping ground, dried mushrooms in freshly boiled water. They are much more powerful when taken on an empty stomach. I find I prefer them at night if I wish to concentrate on the visions seen with the eyes closed. I think they have great ability to stimulate the visual imagination and open people to unconscious forces. For that reason, they may have a place in medicine, and I hope to investigate that potential.


At the same time I do not wish to minimize their negative aspect. Because they deliver a powerful dose of lunar energy, they

are quite capable of plunging people into dark and terrifying spaces, of showing us the hollow madness and sickness of ourselves and the world. No one should risk that experience who is not prepared to confront it. I deplore the use of psilocybin mushrooms as casual, recreational intoxicants. I know one collector who cooked up a large batch of Liberty Cap soup and fed it to a hundred people at one party. Not only is that use a waste of the power of the mushrooms, it is also risky. Significant numbers of guests at such parties become sick or have bad times. Natural psychedelics as powerful as Liberty Caps should be conserved for special occasions and used deliberately and carefully with adequate preparation. At least, that is my strong feeling based on my experiences with them.

Before I left Oregon in mid-November I collected Liberty Caps in many locations, including some on the eastern side of the coastal mountains, where they are not supposed to grow. One of the most fascinating things about psilocybin mushrooms is that they seem to be appearing all over the place, spreading into territory where they were not previously known.

Are we being invaded? I will try to answer that question in my next letter.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'A'.

Andrew T. Weil

Photo on last page by Dean Ornish: The author in pursuit of San Ysidro mushrooms in east Texas in November.

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