INNOVATION #2 2021

Psychedelics

SEEING THE KEY INSIDE

Oregon voters have opened the door to therapeutic use of psychedelics. In a peek at the future, DAVID KUSHNER attends a backwoods retreat where patients with serious psychological issues get help from a powerful hallucinatory substance.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLIVIA BEE

Silo Wellness founder Mike Arnold

NATALIA DEL CAMPO SEES THE BLUE POOL, SHIMMERING LIKE A WINTER OASIS. IT SPARKLES BELOW A SNOWY TRAIL AND ROCKY GRAY CLIFFS, THE IRIDESCENT TURQUOISE WATER RIPPLING UNDER THE RUSHING DOWNPOUR OF TAMOLITCH FALLS.

It's a clear March day in McKenzie Bridge, Oregon, a riverside valley in the Willamette National Forest, about an hour east of Eugene. In 2020, a devastating fire tore through this area, setting 173,392 acres ablaze. Even now, six months later, the road leading here smells like ash; on the way in, you pass the blackened remnants of Douglas firs and toppled power-line poles. The contrast makes the Blue Pool seem even more spectacular.

Del Campo, a petite 33-year-old Mexican American with short dark hair, feels like she's rising from the ashes, too. She had a crushing year—losing her job as a bar manager to COVID-19, spiraling into depression, struggling with complex PTSD stemming from a sexual assault that happened when she was a teenager, attempting suicide, and undergoing intensive psychiatric treatment.

She came to the valley to clear her head, and it seems to be working well. She can feel the spirit of the earth, a deep bond with the natural features of this environment, including the old, porous lava flow through which the McKenzie River seeps upward to form the Blue Pool. If she stares at a tree long enough, it appears illuminated, lights circling it from all sides, making it more vivid than vivid, more real than real. She sees her ancestors down through the ages, living with nature in the shadows of history. She tells me later that these moments feel like "an interconnectedness … knowing that you're a part of something bigger than yourself, something very beautiful and old."

> The sessions we're attending this week are conducted by a startup called Silo Wellness, which hopes to create a framework for psychedelic retreats that have an especially strong nature component.

As Del Campo approaches the pool, she feels her feet taking root in the slushy path, the trees growing around her, the water rising and falling like waves of light cascading inside her chest.

"It wasn't like I was a spectator," she says. "Or like I was in the forest looking at all this stuff. It was like, I am the forest."

DEL CAMPO'S otherwordly trip didn't happen in the flesh. It took place in her mind, after she'd taken ketamine, a synthetic compound used by doctors and veterinarians to start and maintain anesthesia. Ketamine, which is not a psychedelic, was notorious in the 1980s and '90s as a party drug known as Special K. These days it's also legally administered in clinics all over the U.S. as a treatment for psychological disorders, particularly depression. The drug's therapeutic uses are explored in a recent documentary, *Lamar Odom Reborn*, in which the former NBA star says it saved his life during a period when he was suicidal.

Like any typical patient at a clinic, Del Campo consumed ketamine in a carefully controlled setting designed to lead to a safe and rewarding experience. She was seated inside an old carriage house, with a black silk mask over her eyes, red candles burning softly around her, a rose in her lap, classical music playing, and a physician and psychologist on hand, ready to give her water or a gentle touch if things got too intense.

But there was something new and very different about Del Campo's trip: she was taking part in a nascent form of group therapy called the Psychedelic Wellness Nature Retreat, which eventually will include use of psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms.

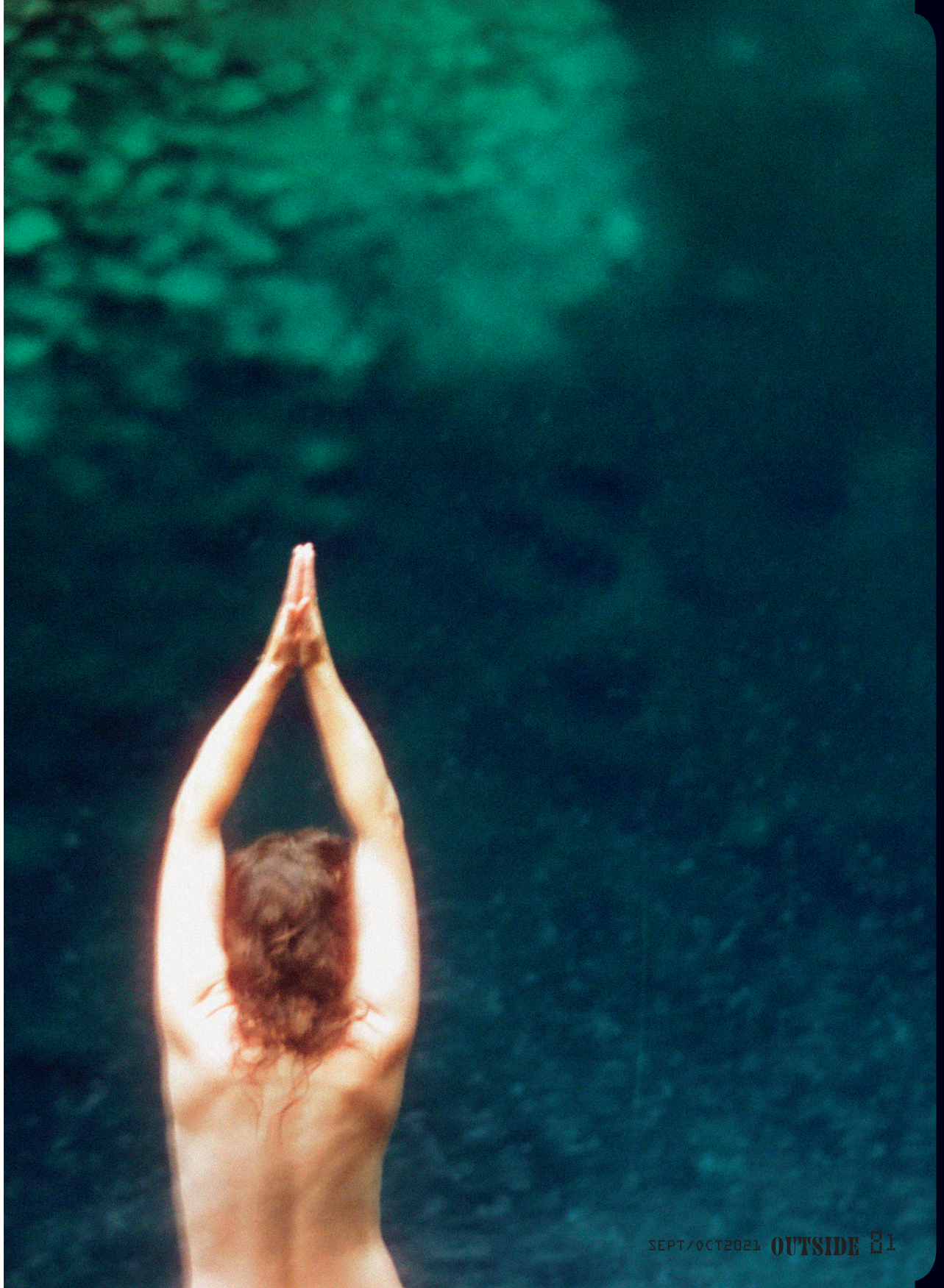
Last November, Oregon's voters approved Measure 109, making it the first state in the nation to legalize therapeutic uses of psilocybin. It will be awhile before tripping on any such substance at a retreat becomes widely accessible: the legislation stipulated that state officials spend two years sorting out regulations and qualifying practitioners before the therapies go mainstream.

The sessions this week are conducted by a startup called Silo Wellness, which hopes to create a framework for psychedelic retreats that have an especially strong nature component. Operating under the new law, the Oregonians who started Silo are doing their initial test runs with ketamine; later they'll add psilocybin to the menu, followed by whatever other drugs get legalized for therapeutic use in the future, including, possibly, MDMA and mescaline. For six nights and five days, Del Campo and four other attendees had come to the rustic Loloma Lodge to commune with nature and themselves—with an assist from three ketamine trips.

Del Campo and the other attendees hope to be healed, and they're motivated. They all suffer from severe psychological conditions, and as another participant tells me during the retreat, they're trying this therapy "because nothing else has worked."

The group includes a software architect, a government worker, a retired stockbroker, and a trauma nurse. While they're here, they'll do the usual outdoorsy Oregon things—river rafting, looking at trees and waterfalls, hiking down slippery slopes to reach the Blue Pool. The ketamine sessions are a powerful add-on designed to take them deeper into their minds and their perceptions of the natural world. The therapists work with the participants to explore the thoughts and feelings and connections that arise along the way.

As anyone who's been to Burning Man can tell you, there's no better setting for this kind of experience than the outdoors. But the question remains: Will psychedelic nature retreats become more than just another high-priced self-help fad? Could they really be a radical new way to solve mental health problems? A lot of serious people, including



"When the ego dissolves a bit, you're like, Oh, I am nature, I am all of these things, and I'm a part of it," says Tal Sharabi, a facilitator at the retreat. "I'm not that different from the owl I spotted, or the tree."

activists and research scientists, believe there's potential to develop important techniques that really contribute to healing.

THE LINK BETWEEN psychedelics and nature goes back a long time. Indigenous cultures have been using substances like mescaline and ayahuasca to connect with their environments for centuries. After first synthesizing LSD in 1938, Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann described it as a "sacred drug" that revealed to him "the magnificence of nature and of the animal and plant kingdom." Ralph Metzner, a German-born American psychologist who worked at Harvard in the early 1960s with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass), suggested that psychedelics could bolster what he called "ecopsychology."

"Psychedelic experiences bring about an expansion of one's sense of identity beyond the usual boundaries of our body-self," Metzner wrote in his 2017 book *Ecology of Consciousness*. "Awareness may also expand outward into a greatly enhanced sense of interconnectedness with all life-forms in the great ecological web of life." He linked this awareness to the rise of the environmental movement in the 1960s.

As research into psychedelic-assisted therapy took hold among U.S. academics in the 1950s and 1960s, proponents sought to re-create the conducive conditions they'd observed in ancient mushroom ceremonies held in Mexico and other places. Leary, the ultimate pitchman for acid, popularized this idea and declared that a good trip should feature a proper "set and setting"—the set being one's state of mind; the setting being what he called "the weather," which referred to both your physical surroundings and the people nearby.

The promise of such research ended abruptly: in 1970, alarmed by a media-fanned public perception that bad trips could cause insanity or brain damage, Congress passed the Controlled Substances Act, which banned many psychedelic drugs, including psilocybin and LSD, for both recreational and medical use. This move, which happened even though psychedelics are among the least harmful and addictive of recreational substances, hampered research for decades. It wasn't until 2000—when psychedelic researchers at Johns Hopkins University, buoyed by the prospect of reviving the work—obtained government approval to treat volunteers with large doses of psilocybin under highly controlled conditions in their labs.

In a groundbreaking 2006 study with a mammoth title—"Psilocybin Can Occasion Mystical-Type Experiences Having Substantial and Sustained Personal Meaning and Spiritual Significance"—Johns Hopkins researchers concluded that psilocybin, a plant alkaloid, could connect us with the world in a profound, spiritual way. According to a press release that accompanied the study, the drug mimicked the effect of serotonin on brain receptors, in a manner that "can induce mystical/spiritual experiences descriptively identical to spontaneous ones people have reported for centuries. The resulting experiences apparently prompt positive changes in behavior and attitude that last several months, at least."

Work like this triggered what is considered a modern psychedelic renaissance, as chronicled in Michael Pollan's 2018 book *How to Change Your Mind*. In addition to Johns Hopkins, leading institutions such as Stanford University, the University of California at Berkeley, and Imperial College London are confirming through research that drugs like psilocybin, ketamine, and MDMA can be used to treat depression, anxiety, addiction, PTSD, and end-of-life issues.

> The group includes a software architect, a government worker, a retired stockbroker, and a trauma nurse. They all suffer from severe psychological conditions; one says they're trying this therapy "because nothing else has worked."

But for all the progress, these studies are legally required to be carried out in clinical research settings; in response, some researchers have tried to bring nature indoors. At Imperial College London, Sam Gandy, an ecologist who studies the link between psychedelics and nature, uses abundant outdoor images in the confines where he does his research. "We have these big screens with woodlands and gardens," he says. "We use beautiful settings with drapes between them to hide all the hospital equipment."

Meanwhile, the drive to conduct psychedelic therapy in natural settings is gaining purpose. A growing body of research supports the existence of what some scholars call our nature-deficit disorder, and of what we're losing because of our detachment from the outdoors. Scientists are finding that the more connected we are to nature, the better we feel: a phenomenon they call "nature-relatedness." Many studies have shown that a stronger connection to nature benefits mental health by improving mood, strengthening cognitive function, and alleviating depression.

Research also shows that psychedelics can be a tool for facilitating nature-relatedness. In a 2018 study done by psychopharmacologists at Imperial College London, participants received a 10-milligram dose of psilocybin one week, followed by a 25-milligram dose the next week. Volunteers reported feeling a greater connection to nature starting in the first week, an awareness that continued for seven to twelve months.

A study done the next year by Gandy and others, called "From Egoism to Ecoism," found evidence of a causal effect between psychedelics and nature connection, lasting as long as two years after use. As the study concluded: "These findings point to the potential of psychedelics to induce enduring positive changes in the way humans relate to their natural environments."

Other researchers have found evidence of brain functions that may help explain these results. Exposure to nature lowers activity in two brain regions linked with depression and worry: the subgenual prefrontal cortex and the default mode network. Studies have shown that psilocybin has a similar effect, lowering blood flow to these areas.

Participants reported worrying less during mushroom trips and said they experienced the feeling of their ego dissolving. With the boundary between themselves and the earth made more permeable, they forged a stronger connection with the environment. Gandy's 2019 study, published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, concluded that "providing monitored psychedelic sessions in more natural settings may hold a unique potential and supports the principle of incorporating nature into the psychedelic-therapeutic centres of the future."

By fostering nature-relatedness, the study said, such experiences may increase our "environmental concern and associated pro-environmental behaviours." The more connected we feel to nature, that is, the more we want to protect it.

IT'S A COOL, misty morning at the Loloma Lodge, and Mike Arnold, the stocky, graying 44-year-old founder of Silo Wellness, is feeling high again—not on ketamine, but on the news of the day: Silo has partnered with the Bob Marley estate to develop a line of mushroom products for use in wellness practice. Silo already grows mushrooms and runs retreats in Jamaica, where the fungus is available for recreational and medical use.

Bringing psychedelic retreats to America is part of Arnold's master plan to turn on the masses to the power of nature. "I want to see psychedelics get in the hands of as many people as quickly and inexpensively as possible," he says. "It should be at least as accessible as cannabis, if not more so." The retreat is a major first step.

This is only the second time Silo has offered one of these retreats—the first happened in January 2021—and the model it's creating is still a work in progress. "We're designing our ketamine retreat as a prototype for the way I envision psilocybin to be administered," Arnold tells me as we walk through the lushly forested grounds. "There's a little bit of psychedelic narcissism in the world where people say, 'Oh, the medicine will find you when you're ready.' But the medicine is never going to find some working-class eastern Oregonian who would never break the law to try a fungus."

Arnold, who's originally from Missouri, earned a law degree in 2001 from the University of Oregon. Twenty-three years ago he moved to Springfield—a small, liberal city just east of Eugene—where he set up a legal-defense practice and generated plenty of heat and newspaper coverage. "I was a very aggressive cross-examiner," he says. His clients included cannabis growers and the antigovernment protester Ammon Bundy.

As a person at the forefront of America's psychedelic nature retreats, Arnold can seem more Paul Bunyan than Timothy Leary: he's a former amateur rugby player who drives a muddy Ford F-150 and lives on a farm outside Springfield. A series of head injuries derailed not only his rugby playing but his mental health. In 2018, struggling with PTSD and anxiety, he connected with a doctor who suggested psychedelic therapy.

Like the loggers and working-class Oregonians Arnold hopes to reach, he had never taken a psychedelic. With no way to do it legally, he found an independent source who guided him through a psilocybin session. That one treatment, he says, got him outside of his head and into the world. "It was like a lightbulb went off. I felt peace for the first time," he says. He wanted to spread the word. "I was like, look, it's really unfair that I got this opportunity and most of the people I know who need this would never eat mushrooms, right? Then I got the vision."

Arnold was in the right place to explore new ground, since Oregon had been the first state to decriminalize cannabis, back in 1973. He joined a small, energetic army fighting to legalize therapeutic uses of psychedelics, starting with psilocybin. Nonprofit advocacy organizations like the Portland Psychedelic Society and the Springfield-based Edelic Center for Ethnobotanical Services began raising public awareness, lobbying, and handing out fliers on street corners to drum up public interest.

They also drew on the wisdom of local veterans of the 1960s, including Carolyn "Mountain Girl" Garcia, the ex-wife of Jerry Garcia and a member of the Merry Pranksters, the group corralled by Oregon novelist Ken Kesey and chronicled in Tom Wolfe's 1968 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Garcia, now 75 and living in Eugene, was raised in upstate New York by two botanists, and in 1970 she wrote one of the first books about growing cannabis, *Primo Plant*.

Her longtime goal has been to bring the kind of nature-relatedness experienced by the first generation of psychonauts into modern therapy practices. "You really start to notice things, and plants and birds and all that stuff comes alive," she says. "It really takes people to a place of beauty. This could be the way to break them out of depression and come back to the world with a clean slate of appreciation for what we've got here."

Measure 109 passed with a total of 1.2 million votes, an endorsement of all the work that led up to election day. "We're standing on the shoulders of giants," Arnold says. "There's a deep tradition in this state, but it's a deep, ancient tradition going back to the Indigenous people." Now, with the law passed, they're trying to bring that ancient tradition back.

"EVERYBODY HAS something they're struggling with, and that's why they're here."

Bailey Nelson, a middle-aged government worker with dark, curly hair and glasses, tells me this as we walk along the McKenzie one morning. (Nelson is using a pseudonym to avoid any complications with her employer.) In a somber voice, she describes lifelong struggles with depression. She went through psychotherapy, antidepressants, the usual menu, but kept hitting the same wall. "I knew there was something there, I just couldn't access it," she says as she looks across the river. "I hadn't gotten to the next level of thinking and consciousness, and that's what I felt I needed."

With retirement approaching, Nelson developed deep feelings of alienation and aimlessness. She lived in Portland, and despite the city's beautiful green surroundings, she felt cut off from nature. When she tried to sleep, she sensed the pain of her subconscious pushing against her, something that she couldn't grasp, leaving her anxious and angry throughout the day. "It came to a point where I felt really hopeless and needed to do something," she says. "Like I was going to implode because I've tried everything. I was desperate."

Nelson had never tried anything stronger than weed, but after doing some online research, she became intrigued by the promising research into psychedelic-assisted therapy. She also knew that the options for trying psychedelics were limited, and she didn't want to risk losing her job. "There are a lot of stigmas around this, particularly in my line of work," she says.

Nelson looked at Retreat Guru, a website for people interested in spiritual getaways, but the only drug experiences she saw were out of the country and recreational. Her therapist suggested she keep looking for something closer to home, which eventually led her to apply for the Silo retreat.

Silo received more than 100 inquiries about five spots, and applicants had to answer a lengthy questionnaire, designed to identify their therapy needs and screen out people who might be unstable. "We have lots of people in crisis who want to come here," Arnold says. "I could fill a 20-person retreat with people in active crises."

Once accepted, the participants did two group sessions and one individual session, in advance, with Matthew Hicks and Tal Sharabi, who are facilitating the retreat. Hicks and Sharabi studied psychedelic-assisted therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies—a private nonprofit university in San Francisco—and have conducted their own ketamine sessions at their office in Portland. They are both bullish on the possibility of Measure 109 paving the way for increased legitimacy.

"There's already a robust underground therapy scene happening, and of course it's unregulated, which is a safety concern," Hicks says. "But the new law will create a pathway for people to offer this therapy in a legal framework. That is pretty significant."

During the preparatory meetings for the week, participants discussed what they want out of the retreat, and what help they're hoping to take away that lasts. The group-therapy format is important; it provides a chance for people from different walks of life to share this journey together.

When the participants arrive at the lodge to get fully underway, they settle into rustic rooms in the main building—a cozy mountain lodge with deep couches, a big fireplace, and a kitchen stocked with snacks, coffee, and tea. After a breakfast of fried eggs and cinnamon-dusted sweet potatoes, each day begins with a group counseling session in the main lodge downstairs. In these meetings, each person shares their experiences, hopes, and fears. The participants will have two private counseling sessions with a therapist on the days when they're not doing ketamine.

> Ketamine has a dissociative effect, and it brings on hallucinatory visions. Nelson can feel her consciousness expanding, and she begins experiencing synesthesia. "I remember, at one point, tasting colors," she'll later recall. "It felt very safe."

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The ketamine sessions take place in the lodge's old carriage house, lined with windows looking out on rolling hills. As participants take their seats, they get their blood pressure checked to make sure they're in good physical condition. Then Hicks and Sharabi go over what they call "flight instructions," orientation for the trip to come. They discuss the basics of the medication: how it's taken (a sublingual troche that dissolves under the tongue), how it tastes (not great), how long it takes to kick in (ten minutes), and what the onset feels like (a little numbness in the tongue).

The experience begins with a 20-minute ceremony, and for some, the ritualistic aspects may be off-putting. But it has a clear purpose: grounding the participants for what's to come.

"The sacredness is helpful," Sharabi says. "In our modern world, we don't make many things sacred, but our existence is sacred and we forgot that."

"The ceremony is really to tell the subconscious, 'Hey, we're doing something different,'" Hicks says.

The set and setting are referred to together as the "container," which means the carefully thought-out environment for the ceremony. As Sharabi puts it, "We like to create this really warm, safe container so people will feel comfortable on their journey."

Candles are lit and classical music plays. Each participant is given a rose, a tradition that goes back to the first wave of psychedelic-therapy studies in the 1960s. "It was something beautiful to ground them, put them into a positive mindset going into their journey, and something to return to," Hicks says. "Follow the music," he tells the seekers.

DURING HER FIRST SESSION, Nelson didn't feel much of anything, despite taking a 200-milligram dose. But the second one kicks in unmistakably.

At first she noticed what she'll later call "a sinking feeling, a warm." Then it seems like she's looking down at herself from above, third person.

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this dissociative effect, and it brings on hallucinatory visions, too. Nelson can feel her consciousness expanding, and she begins experiencing synesthesia. "I remember, at one point, tasting colors," she'll later recall. "It felt very safe." During the sessions, the therapists keep a low profile, remaining quiet unless they're needed. They say that negative reactions are rare; if someone is uncomfortable, a glass of water or a reassuring touch is generally enough to calm them.

But it's not just therapists who provide calm during the journeys—it's the natural setting itself, which comes through even though the trips happen inside. Participants are encouraged to ground themselves by connecting the feel of their feet on the floor with what they've taken in outside. One describes feeling the softness of earth, moss, and wet grass. Another visualizes a large bird of prey seen earlier in the day, swirling around.

"When the ego dissolves a bit, you're like, Oh, I am nature, I am all of these things, and I'm a part of it," says Sharabi. "I'm not that different from the owl I spotted, or the tree."

After the sessions, the group goes for a hike to the Blue Pool. Nelson has seen this spot before, but never in winter. With each step toward it, she feels herself becoming more permeable, more aware, more connected with the crisp colors and air. Bright white snow slopes down between the trees, the sun glistening on the icy surface like splintered diamonds. She notices every detail—the rock in the shape of a heart, the comforting faces in the stone of the jagged cliffs. It's just speaking to me, she thinks.

As Del Campo makes her way behind Nelson, she thinks about how scared she used to be of the woods, anxiety filling her brain with visions of injuries and accidents. She hasn't always been this way, and remembers joyous times in nature as a child. She never imagined getting back to that happy feeling.

But now all she can see and feel is beauty: how the moss glistens, how tiny plants rise up from cracks in the black volcanic rock, how the plump green succulents and tiny gray umbrella mushrooms reach up from fallen nurse logs. She listens to the birds, the sounds of the water, taking it all in. "We came from the forest," she says. "We weren't made in a test tube. Look at all this beauty."

As the group arrives at the Blue Pool, their eyes widen to take in the bluest blue below, the color of a glowing sky. Nelson watches the water in the cold breeze, and it seems like the liquid is part of her, commanding and eternal. "The way the water moves, it's fierce and it's powerful and it demands respect," she says. Each detail becomes a metaphor, an extension of her: the eddy she felt stuck inside, whirling aimlessly, until she found herself here in the bright cool calm. "I've always been able to go into nature and really feel grounded and connected, but it's just a different level," she says. "It's deeper now."

SOMEDAY OREGON won't be your only option for psychedelic therapy retreats. Several cities around the country, including Washington, D.C., Santa Cruz, California, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, have already decriminalized psilocybin for recreational use. And now, in the wake of Measure 109's success, the focus is on expanding to legalized therapeutic use as well.

Connecticut lawmakers signed off on a bill in early June to create a task force that will study the therapeutic benefits of psilocybin. In Denver, where voters decriminalized magic mushrooms in 2019, a panel of law-enforcement personnel, city officials, and mental health advocates have drafted a policy that, if passed by the city council, would legalize psilocybin for use in medical, therapeutic, and group settings.

And in Florida earlier this year, Democratic state representative Michael Grieco introduced legislation to allow psilocybin for therapeutic use. In a January 2021 statement, Grieco touted it as a promising treatment for veterans and others suffering from PTSD, depression, and addiction. "The science regarding psilocybin is real, cannot be ignored, and soon will be a universally accepted form of treatment in the U.S," he said.

Some scientists, however, are cautioning against believing that programs like Silo will be widely replicated anytime soon, since the drugs involved are still illegal at the federal level. Albert Garcia-Romeu, a psychologist and researcher at the Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research at Johns Hopkins, says that the groundswell of interest could send people who are unable to receive psychedelic-assisted therapy toward unlicensed providers. "I'm concerned that by moving the Oregon initiative forward," he says, "it could set back basically the rest of the country and the work I've been doing for 20 years at the lab."

Sam Gandy says that despite the promising research linking psychedelics and nature-relatedness, we're in the early stages of all this. "We need to be careful about making too grand a claim at this stage," he says. "I definitely don't see psychedelics as a kind of magic bullet, but I do think they are powerful tools in the toolbox of nature connection and environmental awareness."

Carolyn Garcia also cautions against being overzealous. The more legitimacy that psychedelics gain, she says, the greater the need for education to prevent the kinds of casualties that plagued members of her generation who overindulged in drugs and alcohol.

"The whole psychedelic movement has grown to the point where they've become kind of common, but there's still no official teaching about it," she says. "We're still not teaching people how to manage, how to use, how to behave, but also how to administer. If you're the person giving a substance to someone else, what are your protocols for passing that on to somebody? Do you have any protocols? Will you make sure that person's going to be OK? Will you sit with them? You know, these are very important issues. We're still in the Wild West."

In the meantime, Silo is already expanding its plans in Oregon. During a hike to the Tamolitch Falls, Arnold says that he hopes to hold about a dozen retreats in the state this year, ramping up to weekly events over time, in addition to the recreational getaways that happen in Jamaica.

As we get to the falls, we take them in for a few minutes, looking down at the awesome rush of water pouring into the basin below. "Could you have this same experience without ketamine?" Arnold says. "Could you have the same experience with ketamine without a waterfall, or with the waterfall but without the group session? We'll learn that over the years. But we can say this is a very enjoyable way of going about mental health. You're going to go through a hard journey. You might as well have a beautiful view."

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