



Belonging to Each Other: the Science and Magic of Empathogens

A seminar was presented on March 26, 2023, as part of the Ecstatic Belonging program. This PDF shares words from Caffyn Jesse. In a video of the event you can access participatory elements and exercises (free at this link: <https://vimeo.com/812172437>).

Key points

- MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, as practiced in the MAPS model, is not trauma-informed in several ways, including:
 - Using a “consent” model instead of “empowered choice and voice” to guide practitioners’ touch
 - Using a cookie-cutter approach to dose and protocol
 - Unquestioned paradigms for social belonging that do harm
- Empathogens activate - and help calibrate - the neuroendocrine system humans share with all of life. We can also do this with breath, sound, movement, imagination and touch.
- We can co-create new methods and practices for integrating medicine work into social change work.

- The paradigm of “self-connection shared” (quoting Audre Lorde) is a key to better belonging.

Words from Caffyn

So today I’m going to share something of my own experience with medicines called empathogens - MDMA and 3MMC are the ones I am familiar with. I have some concerns with ways these drugs are being used currently, and hope to contribute a different perspective to the conversations we now find everywhere - on drug-assisted therapies, legalization and public policy. I have some science to share. I’ll describe what I am exploring with ways I use the medicines, with friends, and offer some somatic practices that resource me. There will be a short break before I go into part 2 - For a smaller group who wish to return after the break, I’m going to try a zoom experiment - with me sharing who I am on psychedelic medicine in a long-distance ceremony. That second part won’t be recorded, but I would like to record this first part.

I want to begin with a territory acknowledgement - and this is key to how I want to be with medicine work. I live on a small island on the west coast of Canada - so small that I can walk from one end to the other in one day – and it is home to 13 different Indigenous Coast Salish nations. Before colonization, all these diverse human cultures wove together as part of complex climax ecosystems. Human and nonhuman worlds co-created an almost-unimaginable diversity. I want my work with psychedelic medicine to be an ongoing territory acknowledgment, honouring Indigenous people of this place, and every place. In the molecular language of ecosystems, we can imagine or remember ways of being and belonging that support differentiation within unity.

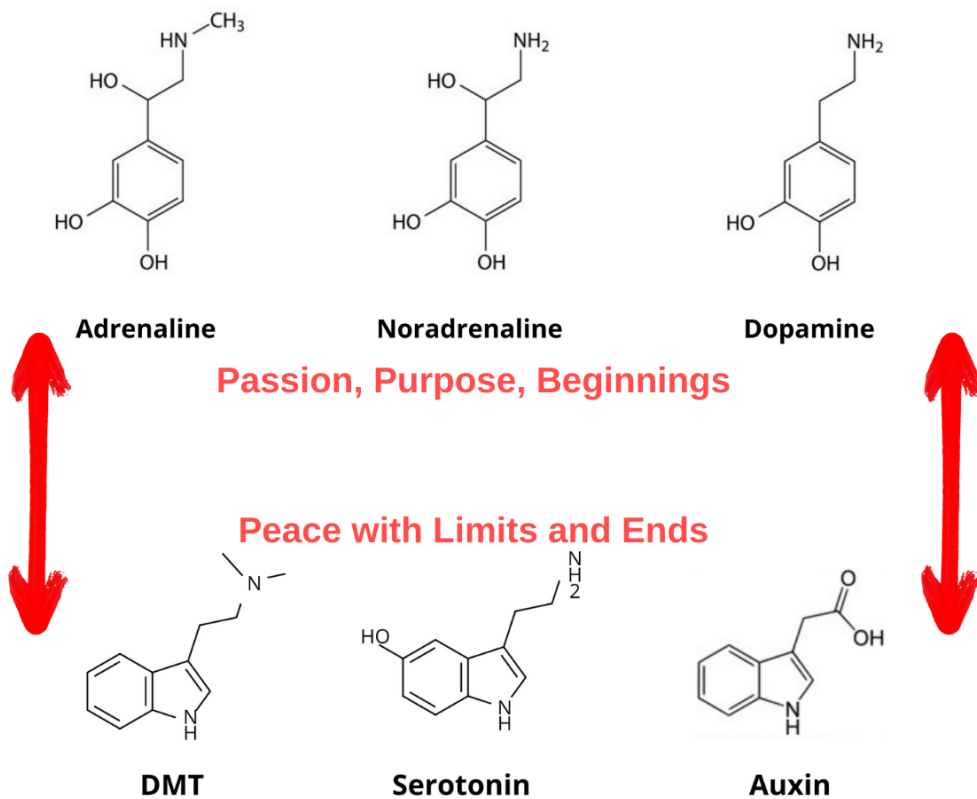
The first time I ever took MDMA - as an adult in a ceremonial setting - was around ten years ago. I felt thrilled with a sense of homecoming. I could feel an amplification of my inner integrity, and at the same time, this an enhanced capacity to connect lovingly with others. It was like coming home to an embodied feeling-state I had always yearned for, without ever knowing if it was possible. I grew up in a household full of violence, and chaos, and I manifested more of the same, in my early life. But I was already in my fifties - and I had come a long way in my recovery and healing before I ever got into the sacred ritual use of psychedelic medicines. I’d spent decades in recovery, and done years of somatic therapies. I’d been involved in queer and social justice activism. So I’d healed a lot of early-life trauma. But there was more healing and well-being to find, through these molecular guides.

So now it’s been many years that the occasional ritual use of empathogens has been a regular part of my life. And I still keep finding my way home. Each time I do a ceremony with psychedelic medicine, I find even more access to how I want to feel, inside myself, and with others. The molecules keep showing me yet another portal, into a deeper, truer experience of belonging - to myself, to my intimate world, to the biosphere. It’s like I need these molecules to show me, but once I have been shown it, I can keep on growing it. Ahh, now I know how I can be, and how it can be between us. As I keep deepening my sense of belonging to myself and my intimate world,

I can also really notice when - and with whom - that feeling of ever-more homecoming is not accessible, so there is also a process and path of ongoing discernment, and differentiation.

This year on my medicine path, I am experimenting with extending that process of evermore belonging within evermore differentiation beyond my intimate world, into how I engage with the larger world. So here we are together in this wild, weird experiment... .

(show slide) Empathogens light up both the serotonin system and dopamine systems in our brain and body, so these are the molecules that guide us into feeling both passion and peace, at the same time. We don't actually need empathogens to find this. These very same molecules guide every plant animal and fungus in the biosphere. They are active in the soil itself. The both-and rhythm - *both* passion *and* peace - is already there, in the rhythm of our breath, in the rhythm of the biosphere.



(stop share)

If it feels right to you, we can tune into the universe of molecules we are together - feel ourselves as part of a quantum field where each one of us is the center of the universe. Feel the in breath, and take in aliveness, feel more impassioned as the one of you - hold your breath - surfing the crest of a wave, thrilling to the abundance. There is only one of you, and no one else will do.

Then let the wave break - follow the cascade of the outbreath, savouring the molecular giveaway - feel the giveaway end. Linger in the space of no breath, at peace with ends. We can rest in being done. Then feel the longing grow, and begin again. Let's see if we can each find our very own rhythm with that, breathing in purpose and passion, surfing abundance, breathing out into peace, and resting in satisfaction.

As we do this breath, I am curious - is a word or phrase that wants to be shared, about you - what is your purpose, your passion, your peace?... Will you share a word or phrase in the chat with us...?

.....

My word today is....

Okay - so now we have actually experienced the secret - psychedelic medicines work through processes that are not scarce - you don't need a research protocol or criminal intent to access the molecules. All the noise about scarcity, urgency and illegality is just a cacophony of harmful lies. These molecules are the neuroendocrine systems within and between us, part of every being in the biosphere. You don't need to fear missing out on anything, if it's not feeling right for you, to explore with psychedelics, or you don't have safe access to them, You can experiment with these very molecules with every breath. If you want to feel a little more passion and purpose - focus on your in-breath. If you want to feel more peace and rest - focus on your outbreath. Want both passion and peace together? Belong to your longing and feel how your longing gets satisfied - with every single breath.

We can use breath, movement, sound, imagination or touch, to shift our neuroendocrine systems. And there are special mushrooms, vines, and white powders that bring their own particular magic, to help and guide us. Consciousness-altering medicines, and consciousness-altering embodiment practices are part of every ancient and Indigenous culture around the world. If and when, someday, working with psychedelic medicines is what feels right for you, my experience is that these medicines reach for us, too. When the time is right, they want to meet us. We find our way to one another.

Much of the clinical scientific research on the use of empathogens has been done using a model called MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, led by an organization called the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS). The MAPS treatment model has really dominated research, and there have been many studies showing consistent success helping people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder experience some healing and well-being.

In the world of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, as practiced by MAPS,

- MDMA can support clients in accessing and processing memories of trauma. Often our memories of trauma are avoided and repressed, because they immobilize or terrify us. Our brains do a really good job of that. But with the support of medicine, we can access terrible memories without feeling deep dysregulation.

- And empathogens offer an enhancement of the therapeutic alliance. The key to how therapy works is by creating a caring holding environment, an environment of love. That's why Freud called therapy, "the love cure." It's the patient practice of love that actually provides reason and resource for healing and well-being. When you do empathogens with others, you want to love them. So a client who does these medicines with a therapy team will want to trust and treasure them, and be cherished by them. Empathogens get us right to the core of love, that all healing is built upon.

I do feel grateful for MAPS for the space they have made around openly exploring the science, and potential for healing. And I do have concerns with the MAPS model. I have many years of working with people with sexual and relational trauma, and according to my understanding, I feel it is not a trauma-informed approach. I sure don't want it to be the only one, governing our imaginations around what medicines can empower, and whom.

One concern I have with the model is that it prioritizes individual healing - and ignores the task of relational healing. It treats individuals, without supporting a client's intimate relational context - or challenging the cultural context.

But it is a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. Anywhere there is a standard way of working with people - a standard dose of medicine, a treatment protocol that always gets followed, it's going to be profoundly wrong for some people. The MAPS model for how to do medicine - lying still with eyes closed like a Victorian wife, with a therapy team that is a male-female dyad - would be a precise trauma trigger for me, as a queer and gender-queer human who has spent many hours pretending to be asleep, while being sexually exploited.

You will have noticed this is a very, very expensive model. It involves a therapy team sitting with a client during the psychedelic experience. It's done in the context of long-term therapy. In this way the model can be said to ignore and even perpetuate the cultural traumas that impoverishes people who are most traumatized.

I am concerned with any model for trauma treatment that relies on digging up a client's trauma stories. Telling trauma stories is likely to trigger highly activated neuroendocrine states, so a storyteller feels flooded by shame, out of control and overwhelmed. Telling trauma stories is likely to re-traumatize. MDMA temporarily boosts our neuroendocrine capacities, so we can remember and tell old stories without experiencing the traumatic impact in our neuroendocrine system. But should the focus of psychedelic journeys be on excavating old stories, or embodying new ones? We create a context for acknowledging trauma stories through many experiences of right-relationship. We can build a neuroendocrine baseline of courage, dignity, peace and joy, with many experiences of empowered choice and voice, respect, pleasure and the feeling of being known and cherished. That is what gradually grows the capacity to go into highly activated states, without becoming dysregulated.

It's a line that needs to be carefully trodden, because we sometimes just really need to tell our trauma stories, and be heard. Personal stories are woven with the historical and ongoing trauma of capitalism and colonialism - systems that silence and devalue the voices of the oppressed, and only let a privileged few be heard. We need to be witnessed, and understood; we need the pain

and horror we have experienced to be known and shared. We want others to understand, so they will share our outrage, so they will stand with us in saying - this should not have happened! This should not be! Never again! In both pain and protest, there is a lot of energy. We feel certainty - and we want allies who share our knowledge that there is a better way, a better world! When trauma stories are shared, I want them to be held in a context of trustworthy devotion to building a better world. If we feel companioned and supported in an active process of making a new story, with a happy end, we can share the most terrible stories, without feeling overwhelmed and helpless.

Another concern I have with the MAPS model is that the organization's "Code of Ethics" uses a "consent" paradigm to define ethical touch. Consent is not a trauma-informed paradigm. We all get lots of experience consenting to unwanted touch. Every time we undergo a medical procedure, go to a business meeting or take a bus, we consent to unwanted touch. Consent is not enough, especially when we are working with vulnerable, traumatized people in altered states of consciousness. We need to learn and practice new ways of offering touch, where clients feel empowered choice and voice - and there is space for feeling into a spectrum of response, and having that welcomed. We need to practice encouraging everyone to change their mind in the middle of an activity, whenever we find that what we thought we wanted was not quite right for us.

So much trauma involves unwanted harmful touch. Experiencing efficacy, power, tenderness, and care in the realm of touch is absolutely key to healing from trauma. I am part of a whole community of practice where people learn how to offer trauma-informed touch. There are many exercises and practices.

You can imagine being in a therapeutic setting with me. You think I am an expert, and you are a vulnerable client. I ask "May I hold your hand?" How would you respond?

Wouldn't you likely say yes? Or would you feel space enough inside you, and encouragement, to be an expert on yourself. That means you take time to check in with yourself, and be curious - is that something I want? Is that something Caffyn wants, that I am willing to give her? What's going on here?

I want a community of practice, in psychedelic medicine work, where each of us is in an ongoing discernment of whether any embodied exploration or suggestion feels right for us. If you say No to me - that is just as empowering and important, as if you feel and say Yes. The point is that you get what is right for you, and feel empowered to voice it.

We get so much cultural training in compliance, and obedience. We get afraid of our Nos - we apologize for our Nos and hurt each other with our Nos. We say No by disappearing. We don't get enough practice saying No, and hearing No, and staying in relationship.

Our cultural training guides us into premature agreement. We wind up getting run by external directives - from people we love, or from the dominant culture, or from the habitual patterns we adopt to survive it. So how do we co-create counternormative space where we keep deliberately

making space and time - inside and between us - to feel our way to our own inner knowing? I want us all to be in an ongoing discernment of our neural learning zone – where can we get bravely uncomfortable without getting unsafe? Too much stress overwhelms the nervous system; it is harmful. Too little stress means our nervous systems atrophy – it is just as harmful. So what’s the just-right place, not too hot or too cold, where we can bravely meet, each feeling into our own inner alignment, and staying curious about one another?

So I’d like to offer an actual practice - drawn from a toolbox of many practices I teach about replacing the consent paradigm with one of empowered choice and voice. One place where we often need practice is in hanging onto self-connection when there is disagreement. So feel into whether this is right for you - and if you want to try it - knowing you are welcome to change your mind in the middle - let me try asking you for a bunch of things I think would be fun to do together. Your only job is to say No. And there are so many ways to say No. Shake your head, put no in the chat, use the thumbs down reaction, or some no face emojis - big frowns.

So even if it feels like you want to say Yes to something, the game is to say No anyway, and just notice what that’s like, to say No when you are feeling Yes, and to say No when you are feeling No.

(When they say No, I always say, “Thank you for taking care of yourself”)

Can I have an hour of your time?

Can I pull your earlobe?

Would you like a hug?

Would you like to try a drug together?

Can I have a piggy back ride?

(dicuss experience)

So you see how you do have connection to that inner truing mechanism that knows what’s right for you. You already know when your words are in alignment with your particular truth.

So now we have done that practice together, has anything shifted? Would you feel a bit more space and encouragement, to check in with yourself, if I offered or requested touch? Professional ethics and standards ostensibly protect clients from sexual abuse by therapists - but when we look at what’s actually happening, we see that client-practitioner relationships are rife with scandal, abuse of power and sexual abuse. We need to *demand* that helping professions resource themselves with education and understanding about power dynamics and empowered choice and voice. Psychedelic medicine guides need to up their ethical standards so that they stop doing harm.

So in that exercise a lot of us experienced that we already have a connection with our inner truing mechanism that knows what's right for us. And if that wasn't true for you, that's all part of growing it. All my work and play involves enhancing conscious connection with this process we are all already doing - of being in the ongoing discernment of our inner truth - we just don't always pay attention, or use it as a guide to right relationship. We live in a culture that teaches us to belong from the outside in instead of the inside out. We are taught to belong by following rules and playing roles.

You know, I am old, and I have been an outlaw to the culture of normative belonging all my life. I am a queer and genderqueer human, born at a time when homosexuality was illegal. When I was young there was no culture around queer except for the bullies' taunts. I had to stay oriented by my inner truing mechanism, to keep on finding my way home. Later in life, I felt a calling to work in the field of sacred intimacy and somatic sex education, which is criminalized as prostitution. My whole career has been against the law. Yet it felt to me like a sacred vocation. And now again, I am finding and following my inner truing mechanism in the use of psychedelic medicines, and in being so public about how that's been such a homecoming for me. Again I am illegal; I risk jail by talking with you about it today. But I feel like maybe I can use my privilege and invisibility - as an old white person - to try to advocate for the subversive potential I find in psychedelic medicine, to uproot the imperatives of capitalism and colonialism from our neuroendocrine system.

So, my process and practice of following my own inner truing mechanism has been powerful. I'm not about tolerance, safety and conformity. I'm all about using neuroendocrine intolerance to come home to a truer version of me. And all my work in the world is about finding companionship in that process. Lo and behold, I found you. Because if you are here in this zoom room, you've done that too, in your own particular ways. You've chosen the truth of you. When did you choose love instead of fear? How do you follow the tuning fork of your own inner knowing? Against the odds, despite the risks, you follow your longing for your own particular path of passion and peace. You've endured the punishments, for choosing what feels right for you, instead of following the rules and playing the roles. So let's just take a minute to feel this company of fellow humans who have all somehow made enough space inside them, to choose what's right for them, instead of being run by what's outside them. Is there anything that wants to be shared in the chat, about how this is true or not true for you?

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What supports me in finding what's right for me is being in connection with others who are in the ongoing discerning what's right for them. Instead of me being an expert, looking for agreement, and adherence to my protocols - I want to be with others who are also engaged in this counternormative co-inquiry. We are all in ongoing discernment. So everything I say could feel totally wrong for you. That is wonderful! Your being in your own process of feeling you, and knowing what is right for you, is what delights me. Sure it's fun to share agreement for an hour or a day, and flow the same way - but what's truly joyful is this ongoing commitment to being in right relationship. Resonance can only emerge when I am true to me, and you are true to you. The pesky structure for belonging on this particular planet is that we are all unique. So real belonging requires belonging to ourselves, and that is what creates a foundation for coming into resonant connection with another. It's about having integrity, like a watershed, while we live

always-new like a river. And it's about noticing and valuing all the ways we already are, we already do.

MDMA has been shown - in animal research - to reopen a critical neural learning window - for social belonging. We have neural learning windows that open and close around various things we need to learn, for example vision - we learn to see in the first few months of life, and if our eyes can't open for some reason during those first few months, it's very hard to ever learn to see. There is another neural learning window for language, that closes around age seven. So if we learn another language, after that age, we'll usually always have an accent - and find learning much harder. Our neural learning window around how we belong with others closes in late adolescence. Adolescence is such a critical period. But MDMA has been shown to reopen that neural learning window, flooding the brain with magnocellular oxytocin, so we can learn again how to belong, and who to belong to. This is why the set and setting in which we take these medicines is so important - we're going to *want* to belong to the people and nonhuman beings we do these medicines with. We need to have a model for belonging that is not going to do harm. For me, the practice of connecting with our own inner truing mechanisms means that we can belong through a process of "self-connection shared" (Audre Lorde). This is a way of belonging that can delight in differences and ongoing discernments. It is an older, newer, truer model for belonging.

We need ways of belonging that are very different from those we find in the oppressive systems that function to preserve belonging for a favoured few. There are hierarchies of belonging all around us - based on race, class, conformity to gender stereotypes, attractiveness, age, disability, compliant behaviours - all the ever-proliferating ways in which belonging is made a scarce and precarious privilege. We learn to belong in a culture where if you make a mistake, you will be punished, stigmatized, outlawed, incarcerated. Even for the privileged few inside the charmed circle of belonging, everyone knows they only belong temporarily, partially and provisionally - they haven't made a mistake yet - or been caught - their unloveable parts are well-hidden enough, or they aren't yet disabled or old. We internalize this oppressive model of belonging in our adolescence - then we belong by identifying only with our better selves, our favourite feelings and most attractive parts. We look for ways to fix, hide, deny and transcend the worst parts of us. We make our own inner hierarchies of belonging, and try to have no shadows.

What I have been trying to do, in my work with empathogens, is find ways to embody and practice new models for belonging. The "Welcome Home" practice of finding belonging for my own unloveable parts, and holding and loving the most unloveable parts of those I love, is key to this. We could call it personal and cultural shadow work - bringing unworthy, rejected, outlawed aspects of us home, and offering them embodied welcome. I have shared a description and video modelling the Welcome Home practice - without medicine - in the Ecstatic belonging program this month, and I will try to demo it in the ceremony later today.

Many therapies are focused on reducing reactivity by numbing and overcoming the body's defense systems. In my practice, it's about *supporting* the body's defense systems to feel that they belong. I want to ally with your discomfort, and blend with the hyperactivation or hypoactivation of your nervous system. Feel your fight or flight. "Let's notice and name the

uncomfortable feeling, so we can also notice just what we are afraid of, and then we can also notice when the danger is gone.

If someone is feeling flight - say "Let's run away together!" If they are upset, indignant, hostile, let's meet and blend with it. Feel the fight, join the protest. And then, I want to know the longing inside it. What are we fighting for? What should be?

(Embodied practice and discussion - everyone who wants to play with me - try picking something or someone who you are upset with. Titration - picking the manageable thing for a 2-minute practice. Not too big, not too small. Just-right indignation...)

Feel the agitation, the fight, the push away, the protest. Feel all the messages that tell you to calm down, and say No to them. Let's push this away, knowing it should not be - push, push, feel your protest, and then at the very limit of your push, feel how it can turn into a reach - what is it reaching for? Let yourself know your longing, feel it, name it. If you can imagine it you already have it in some way, so grasp it, bring it in, bring it all the way in and take it into your body. And savour having what you long for, and being satisfied.... -- discussion)

I also want to go with you into your collapse, and your despair. How can I join you there? We are all hovering at the edge of despair about the state of the world - we can go there together, exploring. What is despair exactly? Let's make that feeling our friend...

(Embodied practice? titration...)

By blending with hyperactivation or hypoactivation of the nervous system, and welcoming it, we can feel companioned. I'm side by side with you in your neural activation, and I can want the discomfort, share it, welcome it.

It's a different way of working with the neuroendocrine system. Each body needs to grow capacity for holding the discomfort its own sweet time, in the ongoing discernment of what is too much, and not enough, and what feels just right. We are growing capacities to write a new story together. We can want more than tolerance of the intolerable system that we're living in. In belonging to our longing, we can feel and find many ways our longing is already satisfied.

I think the empathogens can be extremely helpful in this context, because they give us that neuroendocrine experience of being able to *be with* uncomfortable sensations and emotions, without getting taken out by them. We're not prematurely overwhelmed, or driven into reactive action. We can feel rage, fear, collapse and frozenness, and just get curious about what we are feeling - so we are learning to navigate the whole expanded spectrum of our nervous systems.

I hope we can co-create ways of being with psychedelic medicines that enrich and resource our intimate networks, and our counternormative communities. These ideas and practices feel like one way we can bring psychedelic medicine work into the larger body of work of cultural

somatics - that is all about resisting the intolerable culture of capitalism and colonialism - and the ongoing traumas that we are navigating inside systems that are bringing the world to an end.

My concerns with how psychedelic medicines are getting enclosed and exploited by capitalism and colonialism begin with the false scarcity that's being created around them. Questions of legality, professional standards, and treatment protocols are all being used to obscure the truth - these medicines work with the endogenous neuroendocrine system we share with all of life and death, throughout the biosphere. Science, public policy and conversations around who gets to do these drugs and how are all being structured around the concept of deservingness. You can only belong, and get access to these medicines if you deserve to - by having treatment-resistant PTSD, and work with a qualified therapy team, and with the unspoken subtext that you need to be white and rich. The medicines are getting mobilized to help people tolerate intolerable systems. Are we going to keep our efforts at healing the impacts of trauma confined to the very paradigms that create this awful, ongoing trauma in the first place? I am trying to contribute to conversations about orienting medicine practices to transformative justice.

As long as we live and love each other, these molecules can't be confined to the aims of capitalism and colonialism. This is our own good medicine - the molecules of our global neuroendocrine system. We can find the same good medicine with or without a pill. We can do it as one more way - among so many good ways - to make even more, even better love.

Caffyn Jesse is a queer elder, sacred intimate, teacher and writer who revels in the power and pleasures of the erotic. They offer online learning – including programs on the Art and Science of Sacred Intimacy, and a yearlong journey integrating psychedelics with somatics – as well as in-person retreats. Caffyn is the author of many books including Love and Death in a Queer Universe, Intimacy Educator, Science for Sexual Happiness, and Elements of Intimacy. They are a renowned teacher of sex, intimacy and healing trauma with pleasure. See more, and find many free offerings at www.erospirit.ca.

