MIND FOUNDATION

Humility, curiosity and responsibility:

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In the MIND Bioblog series, we present personalities who have influenced the development of psychedelic therapy, research, and the culture surrounding the psychedelic experience.

Willy Schweitzer, a former entrepreneur who has not appeared publicly until now, is a partner in the MIND family. He is one of MIND's intellectual and financial supporters, a fascinating person, and a profound friend.

The following conversation sheds some biographical light on the European by conviction, born in 1943, and his motives for supporting MIND's work. It took place with Henrik Jungaberle on June 25, 2021, in Frankfurt and has been shortened and edited lightly for clarity. It is part of our organization's transparency culture. We touch on biographical motives for Willy Schweitzer's successful entrepreneurial activity, his search for self-knowledge and curiosity about inner processes, deepened through Jungian analysis over many years. We also discuss Schweitzer's encounter with the controversial psychiatrist Samuel Widmer, who also played an important role in the later development of Willy Schweitzer and his interest in psychedelic experience.

Henrik Jungaberle: How did you come to support the MIND family in 2020?

Willy Schweitzer: I got to know the MIND Foundation and you, Henrik, through the idea of a scientific study. However, this was not comparable to what we are doing today together with the Central Institute for Mental Health Mannheim (University of Heidelberg) and the Charité Berlin under the leadership of Gerd Gründer (EPIsoDE study). At that time, the aim was to bring together and analyze the experiences of therapists working underground with their patients.

Henrik Jungaberle: Exactly – and in this context, we had met for the first time in a video conference. That was shortly after I myself had left the University of Heidelberg and founded the MIND Foundation together with colleagues in November 2016. However, before we really wanted to start such a study, I got to know the Mannheim psychiatrist and chair at the Central Institute of Mental Health, Prof. Gerhard

Gründer, MD. He had just started to submit a study application for psilocybin-assisted treatment of therapy-resistant depression to the BfArM and BMBF.

From today's perspective, I am very glad that we never started such a study on underground therapy because we would have put a lot of energy into interviews with illegally working therapists and their clients to research a subculture. And after that, we would not have come one meter closer to the approval of psychedelic substances and an ethically clean, legal implementation of psychedelic therapies.

Willy Schweitzer: In the end, what convinced me to get involved was the seriousness with which the MIND Group worked on the topic together with Gerhard Gründer. It was the scientific orientation.

Through my professional activity as an entrepreneur, I have come into some wealth. With my wife, I thought for several years about what I could do sensibly with the remaining assets after providing financially for my sons and grandchildren. Life had been good to me and I wanted to give something back. We thought about foundations and endowments, I communicated with the managing director of the Stifterverband and much more. No matter how we turned it around, with today's interest rate situation and with the need for a managing director for this, there would hardly have been anything left for the foundation's purpose.

Henrik Jungaberle: You were once a successful entrepreneur. How did you actually come by your fortune?

Willy Schweitzer: I had already founded a successful sales company in the printing sector at an early stage. After separating from my first wife, I met my current wife on a study trip through Japan and China. She had been widowed at the time and owned a print plant, in which I then took a stake. We successfully renovated it with a new building around 1989. Later, we also founded a magazine publishing house. For succession reasons, we split up our holding company in 2008: I took over the magazine publishing house and my wife took over the print shop. In 2010, I sold the publishing house, and I sold the publishing building as well in 2018.

Henrik Jungaberle: What would other people have said back then about the qualities and skills that made you successful?

Willy Schweitzer: They would probably have said, "Willy Schweitzer was a go-getter, creative, hard-working and worked day and night." I was a "driver" – just like you are, Henrik (both laugh).

And then there was something else – and that was even before I was introduced to psychedelic substances later in my fifties: I could deal with the most difficult business partners. I guess I had good emotional intelligence.

Henrik Jungaberle: What later triggered your interest in psychedelic substances? And what brought about this life change?

Willy Schweitzer: I have to backtrack a bit. Even at a young age, I completely overworked myself: working nights and continuing my education during the day. Then, around the age of 24, I developed a burnout syndrome – at that time called "vegetative dystonia." Through a six-month stay in a psychotherapeutic clinic, I came to Jungian psychology and met my later analyst there who was also a teaching analyst and supervisor. In the course of time, we were connected by a long friendship until his death. These psychoanalytic experiences also made it easier for me to deal with difficult personalities in business life.

Henrik Jungaberle: What brought you from Jungian psychoanalysis to the psychedelic experience?

Willy Schweitzer: I came to a point at the age of 53 where I couldn't go any further. I was going around in circles after decades of following this analytical path with great interest – and I also allowed myself to spend a small fortune on it. I was curious and passionate about inner processes.

And in this phase of stagnation, my analyst showed me the way to psychedelic substances. He himself had been in touch with this experience only some time before. And this hint then opened the gate to spirituality for me – like a tsunami. I had no access to this phenomenon before and saw the meaning of my life more or less in success and money.

I experienced an opening at that time and developed other dimensions of thinking, consciousness and view of the world.

Henrik Jungaberle: What was concretely different afterwards?

Willy Schweitzer: I suddenly became much more interested in the corporate culture, in the way people interact with each other, and in the attitude toward people. You could call it a greater sense of connection, after I saw impressively that "everything is one". This is an experience that has also been described in modern psychedelic research as *connectedness*.

Henrik Jungaberle: What was your first experience with psychedelic substances?

Willy Schweitzer: My first experience was with MDMA, together with my analyst and teacher, and with his wife.

Henrik Jungaberle: Was it difficult for you to get involved in this experience at the beginning?

Willy Schweitzer: Yes, it took me a long time before I inwardly agreed. It was actually difficult for me. I also had a certain fear of it. After starting with MDMA, I had several sessions with my analyst and his wife, each with 300 µg of LSD. Just as the Czech psychiatrist Stan Grof described it in his books, I relived my birth trauma. I had dramatic death and dying experiences. From today's point of view, these were good experiences – difficult and hard, with a lot of fear of death, but also good because my fear dissolved as a result.

After about two years, my analyst recommended that I see Samuel Widmer. That was then also the end of my analysis – not a pushing away, but a further development, a next step. He had probably seen that I had the potential to learn even more and had reached a limit with him.

Henrik Jungaberle: What about Samuel Widmer inspired you?

Willy Schweitzer: First of all, I have to say that I was not a "disciple". No, I saw him as someone who had the greatest breadth and depth of consciousness of the people I know. Unlike some others, I had no authority problem with him. I simply recognized and greatly appreciated him with his extraordinary personality and broad mind. He was already something very special. I didn't always quite succeed, but I tried to follow him in his thoughts and expressions. I was able to learn a lot from him and expand my own spirituality, and for that I am very grateful to him.

Henrik Jungaberle: Today there are very negative reports in the German media about the *Kirschblütengemeinschaft* founded by Samuel Widmer. From your point of view, how did these negative reports come about?

Willy Schweitzer: Samuel Widmer had set out to deal with all perceived taboos and to explore and fathom them in depth. This led to misunderstandings and malicious gossip. He was, as I came to know him, a man of integrity and a spiritual teacher with an indomitable attitude.

Over time, the community grew around Samuel Widmer. Many Germans joined, strangers in a somewhat conservative Swiss village. The locals may have felt overrun and there was bullying. The external hostility then further welded the community together. Samuel Widmer's strong personality and attitude naturally contributed somewhat to this. He was the opposite of a conformist and persistently "did his thing".

Henrik Jungaberle: Widmer seemed to believe that rules that applied to all psychotherapists did not apply to him – especially concerning therapeutic abstinence. He was not contradicted, or contradicted too meekly, by colleagues close to him. Moreover, he used language that rightly turned other psychotherapists against him – for example, he meant to do "genuine psychotherapy." He plays no role in current psychedelic therapy.
Today, renowned universities around the world are doing research on psychedelic therapies. How would you like to see psychedelic therapy in the future?

Willy Schweitzer: First of all, it should come out of illegality and be available to all people who need it. It would be nice if the whole of humanity could have the experience that I have had.

Henrik Jungaberle: Are there characteristics of psychedelic therapy that make it more difficult to develop into a normal part of society compared to psychoanalysis?

Willy Schweitzer: Yes, certainly. Psychoanalysis works mainly through the intellect. But psychedelic substances go beyond that because they confront a person relentlessly. They force people to deal with what they otherwise repress and don't want to admit. From my point of view, this is also the reason why one can get further in self-knowledge with these substances than with psychoanalysis.

Henrik Jungaberle: Is psychedelic therapy something for everyone or only for certain people?

Willy Schweitzer: I think not for everyone. To this day it is not known why these experiences lead some people into spirituality and mystical experiences, but others remain stagnant.

Henrik Jungaberle: You are 78 years old today and have had experiences with various psychedelic substances for about 25 years. In the process, you have seen many people who have also had these experiences. Which people have learned something from these experiences and which ones rather not?

Willy Schweitzer: Some always circle around the same issue, they don't go any further, they stay put for years. Others make sometimes dramatic breakthroughs into other dimensions of consciousness. Perhaps part of the difference is also due to the fundamentals of the brain.

Henrik Jungaberle: Is there a place for psychedelic experiences outside of therapy? Was everything you yourself did in your life with these substances *therapy* – or was that simply a *personal development process*?

Willy Schweitzer: It was a passionate search for self-knowledge and personal development: "Who am I?"

Henrik Jungaberle: Will there be a place for psychedelic experience outside of strictly defined psychotherapy in the future?

Willy Schweitzer: I think so. I wish that everyone who needs and wants it should have access to this experience.

Henrik Jungaberle: What will be different about psychedelic substances under conditions of legality?

Willy Schweitzer: The eeriness, the clichéd drug-like and assumed abuse will disappear. They will shed the aura of the horrible and forbidden and be recognized as helpful drugs.

Henrik Jungaberle: What dark sides of dealing with psychedelic substances have you experienced in your 25 years of experience?

Willy Schweitzer: There are people who cannot handle what they experience through these substances. For some there is overstraining to the point of being hospitalized with psychosis, because they cannot integrate the demonic and the shadow side of their own ego, do not want to accept it.

Henrik Jungaberle: Is it important that these experiences can happen in a mature community?

Willy Schweitzer: It is very important. People must not be left alone with their experiences.

Henrik Jungaberle: What is your attitude towards religious communities around psychedelics (e.g., in the context of ayahuasca communities)?

Willy Schweitzer: There are still some ancient cultures where these substances are embedded in rituals and provide mental health and community experience. But when these are “colonized” and a religion is made of them, it triggers skepticism in me.

Henrik Jungaberle: What is the role of today’s therapists who work legally or will work legally with psychedelics?

Willy Schweitzer: It’s probably about awakening strengths that lie dormant in the individual and allowing them to unfold.

Henrik Jungaberle: Is it possible to guide people in psychedelic spaces?

Willy Schweitzer: Of course: through attentive presence, empathy, music, contact, relationship, address, hand-holding, trust and fearlessness.

Henrik Jungaberle: We sat down yesterday with a medium-sized pharmaceutical company that wants to develop psychedelic substances together with our organizations. How do you view such efforts?

Willy Schweitzer: That is where the development must go, that is close to my heart. Away from the street, away from illegality and thus criminality, and away from access only for a small circle of people. The blessings contained in these substances can only be distributed from the center of society to all those who seek and need them.

Henrik Jungaberle: Willy, you describe yourself as a passionate European. Is there a connection between what you have experienced and now promote with psychedelic substances and your European identity?

Willy Schweitzer: Most certainly! Namely, an openness to the big picture, community, cohesion, togetherness, peace, generosity, tolerance. I got involved with Pulse of Europe right from the start.