

Life or death



By Nate Smelle

BEFORE YOU CAN even get one foot out the door in the morning at this time of year, the temperature grabs you by the face and demands your full attention. Of course this is by far not the coldest time of year in North Hastings. Yet, in a unique way, this autumnal awakening of our senses reminds us of our interconnectedness with the environment that breathes life into all living things.

At the same time, the scent of decay permeating the air reminds us of the impermanence of our existence and the inevitability of death. Just in case the cold air, falling leaves, and seasonal smells are not enough to prod one's mind into a state of deep contemplation on the meaning of life, there are more than enough commercials and programs on television and online encouraging us to look towards what some have identified as a bright light.

If all these things still don't provide enough inspiration and incentive to focus our thoughts on this mysterious shining beacon the end of the tunnel, all one needs to do in October is take a walk through virtually any neighbourhood or store. A short stroll through either of these publicly accessible spaces with open eyes will soon reveal porches, lawns, and shelves full of plastic skulls, ghosts, demons, and ghouls urging us to confront our fear of the unknown.

For some, the inherently macabre nature of the focal point of this annually recurring opportunity for introspection inspires nothing but depression, anxiety, and more fear of our impending demise. For others, myself included, it stirs up a sense of awe and wonder which feeds an insatiable curiosity regarding the origin and meaning of everything.

English poet, painter, and printmaker William Blake shares his view from this existential crossroads, in his poem, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" when he wrote: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern."

More than a century later, another English writer and philosopher, Aldous Huxley attempted to open his mind and expand his understanding of all that is sacred through the use of the psychedelic drug mescaline - the naturally occurring hallucinogenic agent found in the traditional Indigenous medicine, peyote. In 1954, Huxley documented his experiences of this realm in the autobiographical book, *The Doors of Perception*.

In recent years there has been a great deal of research on the use of psychedelic substances and how they can help people overcome depression and addictions. During the pandemic, we have heard time and time again about how COVID-19 has significantly increased the number of people dealing with their own personal mental health crisis. Likewise, as we have heard from the frontline workers at

the North Hastings Community Trust, during this same time period there has also been a rise in the number of people who have died of an overdose.

Speaking with the team at the Trust regarding this web of crises for an upcoming article planned for The Bancroft Times, it became clear to me that we will not overcome these crises until we eliminate the stigmas surrounding mental health and addictions.

The German-born theoretical physicist Albert Einstein hit the nail on the head, when he declared, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

Fortunately, it is on us as individuals to open our eyes and minds to new ways of seeing and interacting with our world. We are in the process of moving beyond the manufactured barriers that have prevented people from using the cannabis plant to heal. In light of the devastating impact of the worsening mental health crisis, it is time for us to throw away our predispositions and misconceptions; and, take a deeper look at how other medicinal plants and natural substances can help people through their own living hell. Tragically, for far too many, it truly is a matter of life or death.