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Timothy Leary's Legacy and the Rebirth of Psychedelic Research

Don Lattin

Timothy Leary, the self-proclaimed "high priest" of the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s, issued countless proclamations and prophecies during his three decades in the public eye. Here's one he made in San Francisco in 1965, just a couple years after the fellows at Harvard College dismissed him as a lecturer in clinical psychology:

> "I predict that within one generation we will have across the bay in Berkeley a Department of Psychedelic Studies. There will probably be a dean of LSD.»

Two generations later, the University of California at Berkeley has yet to establish its Department of Psychedelic Studies. But, as is often the case with Timothy Leary, the high priest was half right in his prediction that mainstream academia would someday rediscover the value of psychedelic research. Harvard does not have a dean of LSD, but it now has something called "The LSD Library." That would be the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library, an intoxicating collection housed at Harvard Library that includes many items from the Timothy Leary archive. Leary would have loved the irony. He's finally made it back to Harvard.

Timothy Leary was born in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1920 and died in Los Angeles in 1996. His death followed a typically messianic media event in which Leary told the world he would end his life, live and in living color, on this new thing called the World Wide Web. And then, he told us, he'd have his head frozen and kept in suspended animation until cryonic science could revive his brain for the continued enlightenment of humanity. In the end, Leary's remains were simply cremated, but he

This article is a transcription of a lecture delivered on September 28, 2017 to mark the opening of the Houghton Library Exhibition "Altered States: Sex, Drugs and Transcendence in the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library", curated by Leslie A. Morris and Harvard Library colleagues. The exhibition was on view in the Edison and Newman Room, September 5–December 16, 2017.

would have one posthumous blast. A small glass vial containing some of his ashes was blasted into outer space aboard a Pegasus rocket launched from the Canary Islands. Twenty-five people had prepaid a private company to send their remains into orbit. Gene Roddenberry, the man who created "Star Trek," was on the same flight.

It was a fitting end. Timothy Leary inspired many of my fellow Baby Boomers to blast their minds into outer space with LSD, magic mushrooms or other mind-altering plants and chemicals. Many of us found the experience enlightening, or at least fun. A few of us never made it back. My task here is to take what's left of my mind and try to assess the legacy of Timothy Leary.

Today, there is a rebirth of psychedelic studies at universities and medical centers across the United States, most notably at Johns Hopkins and New York University, but also at places where you might not expect it, like the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where a young psychologist inspired, in part, by Timothy Leary is conducting a clinical trial to treat cocaine addicts with psilocybin-assisted psychotherapy. At Johns Hopkins and NYU, similar government-approved clinical trials have shown that psychotherapy therapy fueled by psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, can be effective in helping people suffering from depression, alcoholism, nicotine addiction and other difficult-to-treat medical conditions.

Meanwhile, another series of clinical trials using MDMA, the empathy-producing psychedelic known on the street as "Ecstasy" or "Molly," has been shown by researchers in South Carolina to be effective in treating post-traumatic stress disorder, including among U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. In my book, *Changing Our Minds—Psychedelic Sacraments and the New Psychotherapy*, I profile research subjects who have been helped or healed with this therapy. Working as a participant/observer/journalist, I had my own mind-altering experiences with five psychedelic plants and chemicals—taking them in therapeutic or shamanic settings to better understand the importance of intention and context. These interior adventures included taking psilocybin, MDMA and ketamine with trained guides and therapists, along with shamanic encounters with ayahuasca, a psychedelic tea brewed from two Amazonian plants, and 5-Meo-DMT, a powerful, short-acting psychedelic drawn from the dried venom of a Sonoran Desert toad. That last one was the wildest ride.

Perhaps the most important thing to say about these drug experiences is that they are not really about the drugs. They are about the spiritual insight and/or psychological understanding one gains through the experience. One then works with the guide to integrate those lessons into one's actual life. As the religion scholar and psychedelic explorer Huston Smith once said, it's about altered traits, not just altered states.

The goal of these ongoing and expanding clinical trials is to convince the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to reclassify MDMA and psilocybin so these compounds can be routinely used by trained therapists—something that could happen in four or

five years. Meanwhile, spiritual seekers are quietly working to expand the legal use of ayahuasca, peyote and other "sacred plant medicines" in overtly religious settings.

Many people blame the excesses of Timothy Leary and his associates during their three years at Harvard for the fact that university research to better understand psychedelic drugs and find beneficial medical uses was shut down in the 1970s and 1980s. We'll get back to that allegation, but let's first travel back in time to Harvard in the early 1960s and recount the magical mystery tour led by Leary and an assistant professor at Harvard named Richard Alpert, the man who would become a spiritual teacher named Ram Dass.

Leary got his PhD in clinical psychology at Berkeley in 1950 and helped start the psychology clinic at Kaiser Hospital in nearby Oakland. In 1957, he published a well-received book titled *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality*, and was seen as a rising star in the field. Despite this professional success, Leary's personal life was a mess. In 1955, his wife—drunk and distraught over one of Tim's extramarital affairs—killed herself in her home in the Berkeley hills. She did it on Leary's 35th birthday.

Losing faith in the efficacy of traditional psychotherapy, and facing an existential crisis, Leary went off to Europe with his two young children and the idea that he would write the great American novel. Running out of money and suffering from a mysterious illness, Tim was helped by Frank Barron, a colleague and drinking buddy from his Berkeley days. Barron arranged for him to meet Harvard's David McClelland, who ran the Center for Research in Personality, which was housed at the old Morton Prince House at 5 Divinity Avenue (the building still exist in another location) and was part of the university's now-defunct Department of Social Relations. McClelland offered Leary a job. Leary returned to the States and his new Harvard post as a lecturer in clinical psychology.

In the summer of 1960, while on vacation at a villa outside Acapulco, Leary reluctantly agreed to sample a handful of magic mushrooms. He would later call his first trip "the deepest religious experience of my life." The mushroom trip shattered the foundation of his philosophy of life and his view of himself. What we call "reality" was just a social fabrication. Leary became convinced that psychedelic drugs and plants would change the face of clinical psychology. No, they would do more than that. They could change the world. We didn't know it yet, but the psychedelic sixties had just begun.

Returning to his post at Harvard in the fall of 1960, Leary teamed up with Alpert, an assistant professor and popular lecturer, and launched the Harvard Psilocybin Project. Graduate students, writers, artists, academics, theologians and practically anyone else Leary and Alpert could round up were encouraged to sample a synthesized version of the magic mushroom medicine and write up reports of their experiences.

In a recent interview, Leary's longtime archivist Michael Horowitz talked about getting his first look in Timothy's papers, in 1970, when they were still stored in Leary's

garage in the Berkeley hills. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention Michael, whose legacy putting together the Fitz Hugh Ludlow Memorial Library, later acquired by Julio Santo Domingo, continues at Harvard Library.

In 1972, Horowitz and his associate, Robert Barker, delivered some of the archives to Switzerland, where Leary was living in exile after escaping from prison in Southern California. Leary had been busted for having two marijuana roaches (.0025 grams) in the ashtray of his car, which he alleged were planted there by the police. This occurred shortly after Richard Nixon called Leary "the most dangerous man in America," and Leary decided to run against Ronald Reagan in the California gubernatorial race. The psychologist was tossed in jail on that marijuana charge, escaped with the help of the radical Weather Underground, only to be later recaptured in Afghanistan and sent back to a more secure prison in the U.S. Yes, Leary lived quite a life.

Here's what Michael Horowitz said about the state of Leary papers in 1970, when he took control of them:

> "The archives at that point were unharmed and in perfect order. Tim was a scientist, and felt certain his work—the personality research in the 1950s, and even more, the psychedelic research in the following decade—was of a momentous time in history that was going to change everything. Like (Aldous) Huxley, he believed that the discovery of LSD was one of the two or three most important events of the 20th century. The others being the fissioning of the atom and the discovery of DNA, all three happening within a couple of years of each other."

In my view, Leary *was* a scientist, but his psychedelic transformation inspired him to abandon the scientific method and embark on what was essentially a social and spiritual crusade.

Leary's most ambitious psychedelic research project during his three years at Harvard was the Concord Prison Project. Leary convinced the administrators of the Massachusetts Correctional Institute in Concord to approve an experiment in which he and his graduate students would give psilocybin-assistant therapy to prisoners to see if they could reduce recidivism rates. He would claim great success, although a later analysis of the data by a sympathetic reviewer showed that Leary had seriously misrepresented the findings.

What was most radical about Leary's research in the Concord Prison Project was that the graduate students were tripping *with* the inmates. They were all taking drugs together, and becoming, in a way, friends. Sometimes the prisoners sat as guides for the stoned graduate students. This was in line with Leary's pre-existing critique of the power relationships between therapists and patients, between scientists and their human research subjects. Leary was moving even farther away from the traditional

research methods and the scientific method, which as much as anything else would soon get him on the wrong side of the authorities at Harvard.

What was revolutionary about Leary's approach was not that he'd been giving psychedelics to prisoners, who were often subjected to much more dangerous compounds in human drug trials. By 1961, numerous human trials involving psychedelics had been conducted around the world—including some shockingly inhumane covert research sponsored by the U.S. Army and various U.S. intelligence agencies. Leary himself alleged that a great deal of psychological research after World War II—and not just research involving LSD—was covertly funded and directed by government front groups, including some work at Harvard. Prof. Harry Murray, who founded the Harvard Psychological Clinic, had been a lieutenant colonel in the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, the precursor of the CIA. There's a conspiracy theory popular on the fringe of psychedelic science circles claiming that much of the LSD-fueled counterculture of the 1960s was secretly directed by shadowy government forces to distract my generation—the Baby Boomers—away from political activity. We won't get into that debate now, but it can be argued that Leary was a case of blowback against government mind-control experiments. "Tim hated authoritarianism," says his friend Robert Forte. "He rebelled against every institution he came up against." Including Harvard.

The other project that Leary supervised at Harvard in the early 1960s was the so-called Good Friday Experiment. Twenty seminary students from Andover Newton Theological Seminary took part in this 1962 experiment in Boston University's Marsh Chapel. Half of the students would be given psilocybin pills and half would get a placebo pill. This random double-blind research model was designed to measure whether the ones who got the psychedelic drugs would have an "authentic religious experience."

This research project got some rave reviews, including a story in *Time Magazine* titled "Mysticism in the Lab," which reported that "all students who had taken the drug psilocybin experienced a mystical consciousness that resembled those described by saints and ascetics." In fact, Timothy Leary did as much as he could to try to stop the scientific method behind the Good Friday Experiment as he did to encourage it. The principal investigator was one of his graduate students, an ordained minister and medical doctor named Walter Pahnke. Pahnke pushed the double-blind placebo controlled model through over Leary objections. Pahnke also refused to go along with his facility advisor's insistence that Pahnke have his own psychedelic experience before he conducted the research project.

In 1983, twenty years after he was kicked out of Harvard, Leary looked back on the Good Friday experiment during a talk at the university:

> "It was probably the greatest Good Friday in 2,000 years—or at least it was for half of the subjects," he quipped in his Harvard homecoming. "The

> control subjects just sat there and read the Bible. If we learned one thing from that experience it was how foolish it was to use a double-blind experiment with psychedelics. After five minutes, no one's fooling anyone. One you put that pill in your mouth, you are the principal investigator—like it or not."

Decades later, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration continues to require psychedelic drug researchers to use the double-blind, placebo-controlled model. And there is a good reason for this. In his Concord Prison Project, for example, Leary did not have a control group that got all the therapy and other support that his graduate students provided to inmates before and after they got out of jail—but not the magic mushroom medicine. Thus, it was really impossible to know what effect the psilocybin itself had on the reduced recidivism rates Leary claimed to find.

By the spring of 1962, it was clear that Leary and Alpert's research project had turned into a social and spiritual crusade. But it would take another year for the Harvard administration to come up with just cause to kick them off campus. As I tell the story in my book, *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, it was a soon-to-be-famous undergraduate named Andrew Weil who gave Harvard President Nathan Pusey the ammunition to get rid of Leary and Alpert. Weil, who would later graduate from Harvard Medical School and go on to become a celebrated drug writer and holistic health guru, had wanted to volunteer as one of the psilocybin research subjects, but was rejected because Leary and Alpert had agreed to give the powerful mushroom pills only to graduate students, not undergraduates.

But Weil became jealous when he learned that one of his undergraduate dorm mates, Ronnie Winston, had been let into the fold by Professor Alpert. At the time, Alpert was a gay man living in the closet. He would later admit that a romantic infatuation for the undergraduate clouded his judgement. Andy Weil went to Ronnie Winston's father, the celebrated jeweler Harry Winston, and threatened to publish his son's name in an expose he was writing for the *Harvard Crimson*—unless Ronnie would inform on Professor Alpert. So, under pressure from his father, Andy Weil and the *Crimson*, Ronnie was called into the dean's office and asked, "Did you take drugs from Professor Alpert."

"Yes, sir, I did," Ronnie confessed, "and it was the most educational experience I'd had at Harvard."

Alpert, a professor on tenure track, was fired for his indiscretion and Leary's teaching contract was not renewed.

They were also shamed in a page one editorial in the *Crimson*, which dismissed the two researchers as "quacks" and accused them of "flagrant dishonestly that is spreading infection throughout the academic community." The next day the so-called Harvard drug scandal was on page one of the *New York Times*. Weil wrote a follow-up article in *Look* magazine that went even farther.

"One Harvard junior told a friend that Alpert had persuaded him to take psilocybin in a 'self exploratory' session at Alpert's apartment," Weil wrote. "There were stories of students and others using hallucinogens for seductions, both heterosexual and homosexual."

Speaking of sex, it's important to point out that the flowering of the psychedelic counterculture of the 1960s arose at the same time as the wild experimentation of the sexual revolution. One can argue that 1960s revolution was fueled by two pills—LSD and the birth control pill.

Leary said all kinds of provocative things in the 1960s and 1970s, including some whoppers in a September 1966 interview in *Playboy*, which came out a month before LSD was made illegal in California. Among them was the following line, "In a carefully prepared, loving LSD session, a woman will inevitably have several hundred orgasms." Leary was, no doubt, playing to his *Playboy* audience, but his comment pre-shadowed the later neo-tantra movement in the West, in which sexual bliss, along with drug fueled ecstasy, are promoted as pleasurable paths to spiritual illumination. So perhaps it's fitting that the opening exhibition from the L.S.D. library at Houghton is titled "Altered States—Sex, Drugs and Transcendence."

Following their ouster from Harvard, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert emerged as the nation's leading advocates for cosmic enlightenment via the wonders of modern chemistry. Alpert would later travel to India, return reincarnated as Ram Dass, and begin preaching that meditation and guru worship could be a kinder, gentler path to cosmic consciousness.

As I mentioned earlier, some argue that Leary and Alpert's psychedelic crusade in the 1960s was the main reason that university research into the potential medical benefits of psychedelic drugs was shut down from the mid-1970s to the 1990s. In my book, *Changing Our Minds,* the longtime psychedelic activist, Amanda Feilding, summed it up to me by saying, "Timothy Leary left a legacy of making LSD almost untouchable." Roland Griffiths, the lead researcher in an array of ongoing psychedelic therapy studies at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, told me that Leary "played a very significant role in the backlash." "Leary was an iconic figure at the time, but he modeled the wrong outcome by departing from the scientific method," Griffiths said. "He had a lot of interesting things to say, but he didn't pursue a systematic and cautious approach."

There's truth in Griffiths and Feilding assessment of Leary's legacy, but there were other reasons for the crackdown on marijuana, LSD and other psychoactive drugs in the 1960s—both in the laboratory and on the street. Some of it, as one of Richard Nixon's top aides later confessed, was a political attack on the counterculture, the antiwar and civil rights movement.

Consider this revealing quote by John Ehrlichman, one of those Nixon cronies. "We understood that we couldn't make it illegal to be young or poor or black in the United States," he said, "but we could criminalize their common pleasure."

Leary may have, as Warren Hinckle, my journalistic colleague in San Francisco once said, tried to position himself as "the pretender to the hippie throne." But there were others leading an even wilder version of the crusade. Most infamous among those were Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters, who held huge public celebrations in San Francisco in the mid-1960s—the Acid Tests—where they dosed people with LSD manufactured by Owsley Stanley, the notorious chemist and sound man for the Grateful Dead.

While it's too easy to blame Leary and Alpert for the decades-long interruption in university research, the fact that they came out of the academic community certainly helped create a climate that for many years made university and medical center administrators highly skeptical of any research proposals involving psychedelic drugs. At the same time, the crackdown on LSD research was also inspired by a scandal in the late 1950s and early 1960s over another "wonder drug," thalidomide. Birth defects caused by that fiasco led to much stricter safety guidelines to protect human subjects in clinical trials of experimental drugs.

One thing is clear: Timothy Leary inspired millions of people in my generation to experiment with psychedelic drugs in the 1960s and 1970s. He did this directly, by writing a guidebook on how to take an LSD trip in 1964. The book, called *The Psychedelic Experience,* was co-authored by Richard Alpert and Ralph Metzner, the dynamic duos' leading graduate student at Harvard. Their book, based on the writings of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, offers tips on how to handle the "ego death" that can occur on a high-dose LSD trip. That's something that can be terrifying and/or enlightening depending on whether or not the tripper is ready for it.

Leary, Alpert and Metzner were not the first to realize that a safe and secure "set and setting" were essential elements for a productive LSD trip, but they certainly popularized the idea.

The influence of the *The Psychedelic Experience* was magnified a million times over when John Lennon followed the instructions in the Leary manual for one of his first LSD trips, then wrote a song about it. That song, titled "Tomorrow Never Knows," is the final track on *Revolver*, the Beatle's 1966 album that signaled a new direction for the band and all the baby boomers who went along on the magical mystery tour.

Timothy Leary was an Irish rascal, a trickster, a purveyor of Crazy Wisdom. He was brilliant, grandiose, and a master manipulator of the news media.

Let's give Ralph Metzner, Harvard grad and early associate, the next-to-the-last word in assessing Leary's legacy. "For me," Ralph said. "Timothy represented the mythic story of the court jester at the court of kings who was allowed to say things that were

outrageous because he said them in a funny way. Then, when you stopped laughing, you'd say, 'Gee that was really an interesting perspective. I never thought of it that way.'"

"People will say, 'He's completely nuts. He's taken too many drugs. He's a menace to society.' Yet he inspired people with his capacity for vision, allowing them to let go of outmoded habits and patterns."

Leary was one of the most divisive figures of the 20th century. Another well-known psychedelic prophet, Terence McKenna, said Leary "probably made more people happy than anyone else in history." But another prominent commentator of those times, the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, said Leary was "not just wrong, but a treacherous creep."

So what is Leary's legacy? Was he a scholar or a showman? An enlightened prophet or a shameless self-promoter? Someone asked Leary that question late in his life, and he replied, with a twinkle in his eye, "You get the Timothy Leary you deserve."

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