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Citation: White, W. (2014). Timothy Leary and LSD. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com.

Timothy Leary and LSD: “Turn on, Tune In, Drop Out”

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

Timothy Leary was not a logical candidate for activist high priest of a drug-promoting cultural movement. He attended Catholic high school, Holy Cross College, West Point, the University of Alabama and served as a military and research psychologist before assuming a position in 1960 at the Harvard University Center for Research in Human Personality. His primary research interest was on the process through which people changed.

While vacationing in Curnavaca, Mexico in 1960, Leary heard reports of a psychoactive mushroom used by local Indians. The mushroom was said to have a profound effect on those who used it. After obtaining some of this mushroom through a curandero in San Pedro, Leary consumed a small quantity and experienced a dramatic alteration of consciousness. He later described this four-hour experience as deeply religious, and said simply, “I returned a changed man” (Leary, 1983, p. 32).

Leary arrived back at Harvard in a state of great excitement. He had decided to pursue the study of hallucinogenic drugs and

their potential role in facilitating personal change. With two collaborators, first Frank Barron and then Richard Alpert, Leary began the Harvard Psychedelic Drug Research Program. They ordered a supply of psilocybin--the psychoactive ingredient in the Mexican mushrooms Leary had consumed--from Sandoz Laboratory and by reading everything they could find on visionary experiences, beginning with William James’ account of the “intense metaphysical illumination” he experienced while intoxicated with nitrous oxide. Just before Thanksgiving 1960, the psilocybin arrived from Sandoz.

There were many key people involved during this early period who played an important role in the unfolding history of psychedelic drug use in America. There was Alpert who would later change his name to Baba Ram Dass and become a popular author (*Be Here Now*) and spiritual teacher. Aldous Huxley happened to be at Cambridge serving as an MIT visiting professor. He became involved with Leary’s experiments and was an important figure in the dialogue

about what future directions their work with hallucinogens should take. There was Allen Ginsberg, poet laureate of the beat generation, who after taking hallucinogens spoke in revolutionary terms about the right to manage one's own nervous system. There was Ralph Metzner who served as editor of the journal, *Psychedlic Review*, and who would go on to write the *Psychedlic Experience* and other books on the hallucinogenic experience (Leary, 1983, p. 50). And then there was the stranger with the mayonnaise jar.

In the fall of 1961, a British student named Michael Hollingshead came to Cambridge to consult Leary on how best to promote the positive influence of psychedelic drug use. He brought with him a most unusual asset--a jar of powdered sugar laced with LSD. (Hollingshead had himself procured his original gram of LSD (about 5,000 individual doses) for \$285 from Sandoz Laboratories. Leary was initially suspect of the substance as all of the early Harvard experiments had been conducted with psilocybin. Finally relenting to Hollingshead's encouragement, he tried the drug and underwent an experience much more profound than anything the psilocybin trials had prepared him for. Leary became an instant convert to the powers of LSD, later noting of this first LSD experience:

From the date of this session it was inevitable that we would leave Harvard, that we would leave American society and that we would spend the rest of our lives as mutants, faithfully following the instructions of our internal blueprints and tenderly, gently disregarding the parochial social inanities (Leary, 1968).

Leary went on to experiment with many hallucinogens, but none captivated him quite the way LSD did. Leary placed LSD's role in human history on par with "the discovery of fire and the invention of the wheel" (Stevens, 1987, p. xv). As for the man with 5,000 doses of LSD in the mayonnaise jar, Hollingshead stayed at Leary's home for some time and became an important player in the early mix of

psychedelic drug advocates (Hollingshead, 1973).

During this same period, there was a growing national awareness of hallucinogenic drugs. In 1962, Aldous Huxley's vision of a utopian psychedelic society--*Island*--was released and was followed at the end of the year by a report in *Newsweek* warning of the black market manufacture of LSD and its effects (Huxley, 1962; *Newsweek* 1962, December 10, p. 565). Articles on LSD and peyote began to appear in such popular journals as *Life Magazine* and *Time* during 1963. Some of these early articles reported the drug being used by such Hollywood stars as Cary Grant, James Coburn, and Jack Nicholson. Coverage of hallucinogens by the major newspapers was also beginning to increase. Americans read in their morning newspapers in 1964 of youthful LSD experimentation and the U.S. Supreme Court's decision that affirmed the right of the Native American Church to use peyote within its religious ceremonies.

Meanwhile back at Harvard, the Harvard Psychedelic Project was expanding its research to include subjects that ranged from inmates of the Massachusetts Department of Corrections to divinity students from the Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. The Harvard "research" on hallucinogens consisted primarily of getting as many people as possible to take the drug and recording the nature of their experiences. Carefully observed and recorded experiments deteriorated to what appeared to be almost indiscriminate use with little pretense to even sustain the minimal trappings of scientific investigation. Leary and his colleagues did, however, evolve early rituals--rules would be too strong a word--that guided drug experiences within the Harvard Psychedelic Project. These rituals included providing complete information about LSD and the LSD experience before someone used the drug, selecting a pleasant physical setting, using the drug only within the context of comfortable relationships, including friendly drug-free observers, and assuring the right

of each person to determine his or her own dose of LSD (Hollingshead, 1973).

Controversy rose as Leary and Alpert's drug experiments spread through the faculty and graduate students and then to undergraduate students. Leary and Alpert were quite open in their promotion of hallucinogenic drug experimentation--drugs that in the early 1960s were still legal in the U.S. They published glowing accounts of LSD in the *Harvard Review* and *Harvard Crimson* during 1963. In turn, there were wild rumors surrounding the Psychedelic Project, including a rumor that punch at a university function had been spiked with LSD by a student in Leary's Project. Newspaper coverage of the Project became highly sensationalized with titles that referenced the Harvard research project as an "Hallucinogenic Drug Cult." Fellow faculty members suggested that Leary seemed to have abandoned science for his role as leader of what sounded like a new religion (Hollingshead, 1973, p. 39-40). As the controversy surrounding their work increased, Leary and Alpert both left Harvard in 1963, with accounts varying as to their resignation or firing.

From the time of Leary's first experimentation with psilocybin until his exit from Harvard in 1963, those who were enamored with the potential power of LSD and other hallucinogens shared an overwhelming consensus about the potential power of these substances as agents of personal and social change. But they were divided into two camps regarding how these drugs might best be utilized. The first camp, led by Leary, believed hallucinogens should become part of a mass revolution in consciousness--that the drug should get to as many human beings as possible as fast as possible.

Out of respect for the power of the drugs, Leary proposed training centers where adults would be trained and licensed to use hallucinogens. The second camp, led by Aldous Huxley, believed that positive social change could best be achieved by exposing society's intellectual, economic, religious and artistic elites to the hallucinogens. With his death in 1963,

Aldous Huxley did not live to witness the massive spread of hallucinogenic drug use in the 1960s and early 1970s. Leary's exit from Harvard marked the triumph of the first strategy.

Upon his dismissal from Harvard, Leary decided to take LSD to the masses. To this end, he organized the International Foundation for Internal Freedom and the League for Spiritual Discovery and challenged a generation to "turn on, tune in, and drop out." He promoted his philosophy by phonograph (*The Five Levels of Consciousness*), by film (*Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*), by book (*High Priest*) and by Journal (*Psychedelic Review*). He used the stump speech and the television and print media with the skill of a seasoned politician to promote the chemical alteration of consciousness.

Such visibility generated legal problems for Leary. He was arrested for possession of marijuana and LSD in New York, for possession of marijuana at the Mexican border, and for failing to register as a narcotics violator before leaving the country. At one point he faced twenty years in prison on federal and state charges and still had eleven charges pending. Leary served time in prison, escaped, returned to prison, and was released in 1976. After his release, he capitalized on his celebrity status by doing a traveling debate with G. Gordon Liddy who was seeking to capitalize on his Watergate fame. Liddy also had the distinction of having led a raid on Leary's residence in New York while Liddy was serving as an assistant prosecutor.

Timothy Leary died in 1996. In spite of all the turmoil hallucinogens and marijuana would bring to Leary's life, he reported in his 1983 autobiography that alcohol had been the most damaging drug in his life. It had destroyed many members of his family including his father, contributed to the death of his first wife by suicide, and led to some of his own worst moments.

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