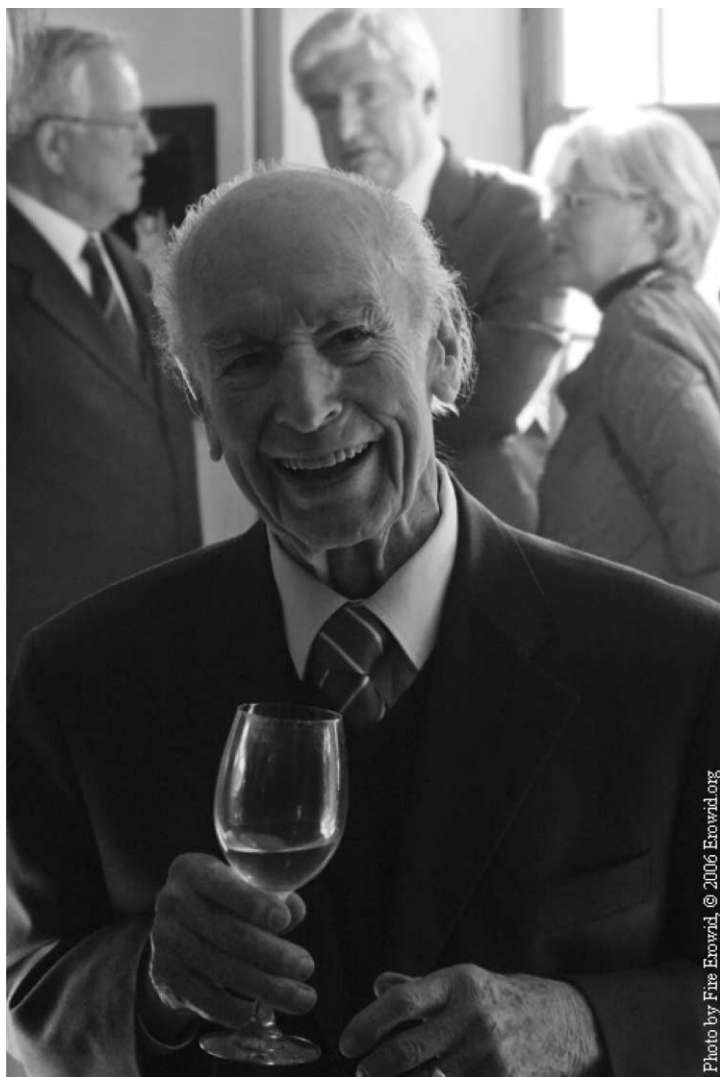


OUR BACK PAGES: CONVERSATIONS WITH THE SIXTIES

Smiling with Doctor Hofmann and the Dead: reflections on LSD, the counterculture and wisdom

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Dr Albert Hofmann, at age 100, in Basel, Switzerland in 2006.

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The authors cited laboratory experiments with subjects in an induced-trance state which suggested that the human optic system generates the same type of visual illusions, in the same three stages, differing only slightly by culture, whatever the stimulus: drugs, music, pain, fasting, repetitive movements, solitude or high carbon dioxide environments (a phenomenon that is common in close underground chambers, like Lascaux and Chauvet Caves).

In the first stage, a subject sees a pattern of points, grids, zig-zags and other abstract forms (familiar from the caves); in the second stage, forms morph into objects – the zig-zag, for example, might become a serpent. On the third and deepest stage, a subject feels sucked into a dark vortex that generates intense hallucinations, often of monsters or animals, and feels his body and spirit merging with theirs. (T.A. Dowson and Davis Lewis-Williams, “The Signs of All Times”)

When you peer into the eyes of a hundred-year-old man and see radiance, joy, and curiosity, unmuddled by anxiety or fretted by regret, it would not be unusual to challenge oneself with the question: “Does my own life express such fulfillment?” When that centenarian is Dr Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who first synthesized lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in 1943, honest self-reflection requires a more unnerving query: “Have I missed something?” This was my experience reading an article about the death of Dr Hofmann in the *New York Times* not long ago and seeing a photo of the good doctor, looking sage, healthy, and ecstatic.

Dr Hofmann was so radically transformed by ingesting LSD that he dedicated much of the rest of his career to isolating and studying psychedelic substances: first, *psilocybin*, the psychoactive ingredient in Mexican “magic mushrooms,” and, after that, *lysergic acid amide* derived from the potently hallucinogenic seeds of the Morning Glory. His early experiments with ergot had opened for him what Carlos Castaneda describes in his Don Juan books as “a path with a heart” – an investigative and soulful journey which tests, nourishes, and protects a person during the course of life. Though I could be wrong, I intuitively connect Hofmann’s glowing physical affect to benefits derived from his avowed field of study and regard his world-changing research, as he did, as a gift to humanity.

In a *New York Times* piece shortly following his death on 29 April 2008, Edward Rothstein waxes philosophical about Dr Hofmann and the cultural impact of LSD. Mr Rothstein is coy about his personal use of acid, allowing that, “I, and seemingly everyone else I knew, ingested that culture even if not the drug itself.”¹ Despite his apparent innocence of first-hand information, he devotes his column largely to denigrating the 1960s counterculture, marveling that “it seems even stranger with the passing of time” and dismissing aspirations to transcendence through psychedelics as “a remarkable form of cultural intoxication.” After concurring with the opinion of the pharmaceutical industry circa 1965 that LSD had become “a serious threat to public health,” he concludes that the “great promise” of LSD came essentially to naught. Assessing the drug’s legacy, and indulging a tired “from Haight-Ashbury to Silicon Valley” trope, he insists that, “it is through technology, not despite it, that LSD visions were realized.” As “proof” of this flaccid insight, he points to the iPod, sprung from the factory of the notoriously trippy Steve Jobs. So here we have it: the spiritual quest of a generation, partly inspired and guided by Dr Hofmann, Aldous Huxley, and other kindly sages, vaporizes into a ubiquitous smog of anomic consumerism, sensory entertainment, and a dubiously useful virtual “connectivity.”

Had I not lived in the 1960s counterculture and ingested LSD myself, I might have been grateful to the journalist for alerting the haplessly naïve, who might otherwise have fallen

prey to Dr Hofmann's charisma and experimented with the most celebrated product of his laboratory. I might have applauded the columnist's assertion that the counterculture had some fatal negativity hidden within its tie-dyed breast. I might even share his implied satisfaction that all that hippie tomfoolery – at once Romantic and dangerous – is behind us, and his corollary assumption that our world is somehow the better and the safer for it. But I am not, I did not, and I do not.

It is common for those who neither sought nor participated in the Sixties' sacraments and rituals of freedom and abandon to denigrate the era's radical social experiments. Such nay-sayers often cite the occasional disasters attending such explorations to justify their own failure of nerve and disguise their covert desire that no one experience either the pleasures or dangers they foreswore. (I've yet to meet anyone who does not drive because of the 50,000 deaths a year from auto accidents, or who rues a day in the mountains because the occasional hiker perishes.) In this manner, they resemble the characters in the film "The Big Chill," who were presented as Sixties archetypes. Each had flapped his wings a few times in youth, deemed flying impossible, then stifled the desire to soar and settled, without further struggle (but much wistful *ennui*), into a compromised and disappointed adulthood.

I remember those times and Dr Hofmann's contribution to them vividly and with great fondness, though also, it must be admitted, with some sense of mourning for a few friends who flew too near the sun and perished, literally or figuratively. On the occasion of Dr Hofmann's death, I am therefore impelled to counter earthbound critics like Mr Rothstein by sharing some reflections on what it felt like – and still occasionally feels like – to fly.

It is difficult to reconstruct the vitality and élan of the 1960s from the accumulated horrors and disillusionments of the early twenty-first century. Hope has been tarnished by disappointment and politics has failed so absolutely and on so many fronts. But, 40 years ago, a sizeable percentage of my generation honored fervent convictions concerning justice, generosity, and non-violence, and, by living simply and conscientiously, struggled to create new social forms to express them in daily life.

Bob Dylan once observed of the early Sixties, that it was a time "when you'd drive 1,000 miles for a good conversation." I remember the insistent pressure of self-discovery and immanence propelling such journeys. At 13, I followed the Pied Piper of folk music off the homogenizing pavement of a New Jersey suburb into New York City's Greenwich Village: a wild land of old hipsters, beatniks, yogis, sexually liberated women, pot-smokers, chess-players, political thinkers, *aficionados* of American song, and musicians my own age whose skills were already daunting. I met old radicals and lefties, Communists, Socialists, anarchists, and all manner of autodidact scholars who taught me history, gave me books, sent me to libraries and museums in pursuit of knowledge that I did not know existed, and, most importantly, challenged me to question everything – conventional wisdom and even their own.

I mingled with feverishly imaginative kids from the Bronx School of Science and the School of the Performing Arts. They read avidly and discussed the same books and ideas fueling my enthusiasms. From them I assembled bibliographies to read and records to absorb. Life was an exciting and demanding schooling, next to which junior high-school was stultifying.

Each new person was a mystery to be plumbed for secrets and idiosyncratic treasure. Young men and women from other cultures than my own appeared, flying flags of fashion foreign to established sensibilities, creating new standards of beauty. Excluded or freed from the corny, belted, Ivy League uniforms and buzz-cut haircuts of Fifties corporate culture,

Jewish kids, Italians, Irish, Eastern Europeans, Iranians, African Americans, Samoans, Arabs began acting out archetypal identities from their cultural traditions, letting their hair grow, using their bodies as canvas and their clothes as paint, reinventing language, music, art, and theatre.

The streets were a bazaar of characters and impressions plucked from world literature and myth. On any given day one might encounter endearing facsimiles of the Lone Ranger, Shakhly, Arthur Conan Doyle or Geronimo parading their fantasy down the boulevard. *Dakini* consorts to the Hindu Gods trailed Earth Mothers down the sidewalks, braiding their hair with flowers, exotic perfumes trailing in their wake. (The hazards of an indigenous, exoticizing Orientalism had not yet occurred to many of us.) Gentleman Jim Corbett, English rockers, Hell's Angels, and neurasthenic aesthetes resembling Rimbaud and Verlaine appeared from Cincinnati and Omaha, Durham and Boston to command attention with fresh standards of beauty and intriguing modes of social play. They all vied for center-stage on the roiling sidewalks. Freshly minted or re-minted models of being, once expressed in the flesh, became the basis for emulation and refinement by others, creating feedback loops outside of the formal world of fashion. Tribes, cultures, and subcultures always identify themselves by distinctions of costume and the semiotics of dress, and it was no different then. (Nor were Vogue and its minions less quick then than they are today to create commercial fashions from whatever popular cultural expression dominates the moment.)

Disseminated virally by word of mouth, road trips, literary subcultures, itinerant folk and rock bands, and, soon enough, a gawking media, bohemian communities sprang into existence like mushrooms after a rain. In every major city, these quarters pulsed with sex, marijuana smoke, patchouli oil and Indian incense. They harbored good and crazy causes, and, contrary to the reputation of the Hippies as self-indulgent solipsists, deep eddies of conscience. All this stimulated the senses, minds, and politics of escapees from the "official" America.

Travel was one way to express and release that turbulent energy. It put my generation in motion on the same tracks and trails that crisscrossed the landscape of America's blue-collar, revolutionary history and mythology. We followed hobos, Wobblies, grifters, blues men, writers, poets, and bohemians. I traveled by freight train to folk music festivals in Chicago, and crossed the country to see the Beatniks in San Francisco at 16. I traded songs, crashed at the apartments of total strangers for no better reason than that they looked interesting. We played music all night, drank cheap wine, smoked dope, shared reading, and wrote our own poems, plays, and songs.

College was equally exciting, enhanced by the release from parental influence at the day's end. My core group of friends and I improvised a curriculum of living, developed and deepened it as we performed together, tried on identities and beliefs for utility and fit, and pushed one another in extended, probing conversations.

During my sophomore year, we sent away to Moore's Orchid Farm in Laredo, Texas and received a box nearly three feet long filled with hallucinogenic Peyote cactus. Native Americans on the nearby Tama Indian Reservation taught us to prepare and ingest them for a tithe of less than half. Ingesting these bitter green cacti vaulted me right over the perceptual barrier between "I" and "out there," and it was a life-altering transition.

Nothing remained quite the same after that, not my identity, nor my aspirations. The impulse to explore that infinite, borderless state remained a shimmering constant, generating questions I have spent the rest of my life pursuing. Despite not having a framework to understand it at the time, the peyote experience was a deep, spiritual well to which I returned for many years. I recognized water from the same aquifer when I later became one among many of the pilgrims ingesting what we perceived as "the sacrament" of LSD. Ten years

after that, I baptized my entire life in the source itself by adopting the practice of Zen Buddhism, which I continue today as an ordained practitioner, 33 years after first entering the monastery.

Much credit for this early spiritual bloom in the gardens of Babylon is due to Dr Hofmann, and later his clownish proselytizer, Tim Leary. Despite Leary's egomania, recklessness, and eventual betrayal of those who helped him escape from prison, I might not have had the courage to cross the threshold of LSD without his Harvard-credentialed *imprimatur*. Before diving in, I tested the temperature through his writings, which had made their way to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, my home while I attended graduate school.

The first time I took LSD, my roommate Karl Rosenberg, a painter and sculptor with a wild imagination and a soft amused gaze, volunteered to "mind me" and insure that I came to no harm. (Anyone who does not tremble at the edge of the untracked wilderness of the mind is a fool, and I was thankful for Karl's unflappable presence.)

By the time Ravi Shankar's music had transformed me into something as sinuous as smoke, and my ego expanded to include the entirety of my surroundings, I had gone far beyond what I could recognize as either fear or comfort. The terrain and its sensations were similar to those of peyote, but more powerful. Everything quivered and shimmered with beauty. Ecstasy is not too strong a word to describe this expansion of self to include everything, but it was an ecstasy in flux, not precisely constant, and it produced occasional twinges and hints of strange energies just beyond the barrier of the visible – a warning to stay alert.

The prison of verbal description and syntax disappeared and what remained were vibrating intensities of form and color interacting with mind/body to the degree that it was impossible to determine which was creating which. My face in a mirror was still my face, but morphing into and out of the skull beneath it. My hairs registered as electrical currents writhing and crackling in the air. Form was liberated from gravity and definition. Things "were" and "were not" simultaneously – a condition beyond the capacities of language to express, but nonetheless appreciable and true. Years later, seeking a drug-free and sustainable liberation through Buddhism, I encountered the essence of this paradox in the core text of the 2500-year-old *Prajna Paramita Sutra* in which Buddha (in the form of Avalokiteshvara, goddess of compassion) states:

Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness not different than form. That which is form is emptiness; that which is emptiness form.

Wandering around my apartment that night, marveling at the mysterious uniqueness of each object in it and the feelings they liberated from a wide-open and guileless heart, I was dancing in emptiness: the generative force endlessly producing and swallowing solar systems, salt cellars, civilizations, human lives, mountain ranges, lightning bugs, concepts, emotions, and dolphins. Like a wave, I possessed a momentary, individuated expression and yet was simultaneously the sea itself, and understood clearly that I had never, not once, ever been separate from it. When the life force holding my various parts together would finally disintegrate, I understood, without fear, that I would return to what I had always been before I was born.

The next morning, the world appeared fresh and new, as if rain had washed away a delicate powdering of dust I had never before noticed. Everything made sense, and particularly the art and of expression the counterculture. The psychedelic posters advertising rock shows at the Fillmore and Avalon ballroom were visual shorthand for the melding of in-line and out-line precipitated by LSD. Anyone who had crossed that border recognized those

ideograms of inner and outer space – immediately. For those who had not, the colorful posters were likely just the “next new thing,” effusions of “style.”

From this point on I was, in company with many others, an initiate of the strange, the miraculous and the vibrantly alive. I don’t mean to suggest that we had all ingested “wisdom” pills and achieved enlightenment, far from it. But the geography of wisdom was now a discernable, available *territory*. Reports from its hinterlands were transmitted widely, and publicly expressed in the coded lyrics of songs, the art, the politics and the transformed performances of newly awakened beings, returning to share the news and artifacts of discovery like so many Lewis and Clark’s of the inner wilderness. Some perished on the journey and some were too shaken to continue, but for others like myself, our feet were firmly pointed towards these shadowy hills and our intentions to explore them fixed.

Fifteen years later kids were dropping acid at the malls and video-game parlors, in rituals of curiosity and defeat. Perhaps they were no less hungry for spiritual insight than my generation, but to my sympathetic eye they appeared overwhelmed by the spawn of materialism and consumer culture that had metastasized around them in the ensuing years. (Though for decades the Grateful Dead scene, with its barter economy and acid holding steady at three dollars a tab, provided an admirable, if episodic, escape.) Spiritual exploration had been assaulted by the tectonic forces of global capitalism, whose culture peddles New Age cures for the sicknesses it creates and disseminates.

Nearly 45 years later, the world is mostly a colder, less hospitable and gracious place, and psychedelic subcultures – despite an expanded pharmacopia (and more draconian laws) – exist only at the far margins. With some inspiring exceptions, the radiant inclusiveness of LSD has been replaced by the remorseless seduction of cocaine and the suicidal nihilism of meth. Consumerism and worship at the church-of-self have effaced collective expressions of generosity, like corporate logos defacing public spaces. In the urban consumer temples reserved for the dwindling numbers with disposable income, young black men browse, wearing baggy jeans below their waists like ill-fitting prison garb and defying the hyper-vigilant clerks with stony faces. Their manner and dress declare loud and clear that they free. Gleaming under their denim cuffs are the symbols of our mutual disempowerment – the Nikes, Jordans, Adidas, *et al.*, stitched together by the impoverished women in Asia to whom we are all invisibly bound. Percolating beneath everything, stoking the common fire, boiling the water, powering the turbines of commerce, the corporate sector and its minions devour the planetary commons: the immeasurable diversity of the biosphere sucked into its insatiable maw.

I appreciate that my rage at the mindless sacking of creation appears to betray the good-humored, transcendental legacy of Dr Hofmann. Maybe this rage and more – my guilt at not working hard enough to defend creation; my generation’s failure at many of our political goals; my mourning for the passing of so much that was glorious about the Sixties and its dream of a perfectable America; perhaps my entire universe of sentient and worldly attachments – account for my feeling soothed but simultaneously challenged by Dr Hofmann’s beatific obituary photograph.

His smiling eyes remind me that in his century of life he had witnessed all the horrors I have and countless others, without (I imagine) losing his psychic balance, succumbing to anger, guilt, or sorrow. A friend, who visited him shortly before he died, indeed reported that he appeared never to forget to prize each moment or the miracle of the smallest thing.

I had taken his chemical communion, in perhaps the best place and time History had allowed for it. I had followed the drug and the heart path to more purposefully elucidating

temples, had studied wisdom itself and become wiser as my years accumulated. Why did I not permanently share Dr Hofmann's repose nor smile?

The answer arrives from the compassionate teachings of another smiling man, my ultimate teacher, Gautama Buddha. His first instruction is to recognize and profoundly accept that "Suffering exists." It is not an illusory spider-web to be brushed aside so that one may enter a perfect, imagined heaven. Even the Buddha himself suffered suffering, illustrated in an ancient story, pried from my memory.

The Buddha's nation was being attacked by a rival king. Murder, looting, and destruction were rampant. One of the Buddha's disciples discovered his master weeping, and, being a novice with respect to the teachings, asked him why, "If form is emptiness and emptiness is form," would he weep over a war destroying that which never existed?

Of course, the Buddha never said that things "existed" or "did not exist"; never suggested that emptiness trumped form, or vice versa. I imagine him regarding his student sweetly, and explaining, in a voice as soft as the footfall of a butterfly, that *in the world of form*, he, like everyone else, was subject to *karma* – the suffering derived from attachment to the world. No transcendental knowledge liberates us from the consequences of that attachment or saves us from tears and longing.

From this recollection, a new image constellated in my imagination, just as vivid but more durable and fixed than the shimmering ecstasies of LSD. In it, Dr Hofmann and I are conjoined as an iteration of Janus, the God of gates and doors, beginnings and endings, who had two faces linked at the back of the head. *My* face, alive in the present, is bound to the world of form: at once brightened and condemned by my love of hummingbirds, deserts, and ethical puzzles; of friends and comrades and playful women; of people I've touched and nurtured, and those I've failed and fled; of cultures and cities and nations and causes; of fog and temples and turbulent seas.

Affixed to the back of my head, on the "free" side, the smiling face of Dr Hofmann peers gleefully into the emptiness before him. Fully liberated by death, he is freed from attachment to form and its consequences, inseparable from the great ocean in which he was once, like me, a small, peaking wave. Our heads share the same nature and both see through the Buddha's eyes. When I bow to the world, old Dr Hofmann is tipped on his back, gazing skyward. When that happens, I imagine him laughing gaily as a child on a see-saw, delighted by the comedy of my joys and confusions, my yearnings and regrets. He knows that form and formlessness, plenitude and loss, creation and suffering, being and non-being *together* express the absolute nature of reality, the inexpressible reason that the Buddha sits so still and smiles so softly in the starlight.

Thinking of all this, I smile too.

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Notes

1. Rothstein, "A Mind-Altering Drug Altered a Culture as Well."

Notes on contributor

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