

Reflections and Illuminations

Following an Initial LSD Experience

ANONYMOUS

I am a research psychologist, with clinical training, the mother of several children, and in my early 40's. One week ago, in order that I could know the experience, and without expectation of personal growth, consciousness-expansion, or pleasure, I took LSD. The setting was my own home and deck. It was a warm, sunny day. I was attended by a couple, personally acquainted with the effects of hallucinogens, who remained straight. Recorded here are my insights and my personal reactions. I will focus upon qualities of the experience which seem to me to explain the values, foci of interest, manner of relating, and life style of the user. My language when describing the experience is poetic, not for literary effect, but because only in that way am I moved to describe the experience.

THE EXPERIENCE ITSELF

Recorded early the morning after the experience.—It was an awe-full, magnificent, ecstatic journey, too powerful and terrifying to repeat. The experience is a visualized metaphor. It is as though the universe does its thing for you, and it is your day to become lost in the cosmic dance. God says to you, "If you are willing to pay the price in pain, terror, annihilation of ego, and total isolation from normal sensations and human contact, I will permit you to sense directly the workings of your own body, and the manifold physical phenomena of which you are a part. You will seem continuous with others of my creatures and the thing you do will seem no higher or more marvelous than the thing which the rock does or the grass does or the butterfly does. Destroy Self. Behold lila, the perpetual, blissful dance of the universal, caring spirit. Set aside

your productive, constructive self and lose yourself in appreciation of what is *there* without you."

I recall most vividly my utter vulnerability. I was completely helpless, entirely receptive and without effective will of my own. I could do nothing for myself because any desire towards an object, such as food, was opposed by an equally strong aversion towards the pursuit of that object. No matter how uncomfortable my state I could not will it to be otherwise. I was dependent entirely upon the sensitivity of my attendants. I was gratefully aware, that in order for it to be *my* day they had to nullify their egos, make no suggestions to me, and offer no help which I did not specifically solicit. They were to be there to protect me, answer my questions, and facilitate a safe return. Any show of anxiety, or impatience, or levity would not merely destroy the experience but, so I felt, leave a permanent residue of unresolvable bad feeling. The good attendant whatever his usual self, in the truest sense acts towards the user in the spirit of agape. Intrusion by another doing his thing is gauche, indelicate, and when hostile, brutal beyond belief. I would have found incomprehensible the probings described by professional observers such as Sidney Cohen (*The Beyond Within*). The sage interference of a guru such as Leary (*The Psychedelic Experience*) would have been annoying and distracting. If a doctor, or police officer, or well-meaning friend, had tried actively to interfere, I felt at the time, that I would not ever have recovered my sense of well-being and self-esteem.

Together with vulnerability, the most salient quality of the LSD experience was its uniqueness. It is impossible for me to think about or describe the trip

without hyperbole. I am left with the conviction that no person, except perhaps a schizophrenic, can imagine the state of the user. The fact that the user cannot convey the extraordinary beauty of his perception, or the inner validity of his insights, may alienate him from the non-user and certainly will lead him to resent contradiction or explanation from the non-user. Just as the interpretations of the non-user are out of tune with the experience of the user, so the user brings little back from his trip which can enlighten the non-user. Hippie language sounds silly, cultish, noncommunicative, and deficient to the non-user. It evokes in the user shared images and ideas. The singular experience of taking LSD can make the user more sensitive to the problems of those in deep trouble—especially the schizophrenic, the drug-user, and alienated, and the young. It may make the user less intrusive and contentious and more appreciative and receptive. It can make him grateful to his attendants, and to the physical universe for its abundance. However, the singularity of the drug experience limits its applicability outside the hippie or psychotic community.

One is moved to wonder, reverence, and awe by that which is truly unique. If by repeated exposure or misuse a user becomes blase or ungrateful, I should imagine that he would thereby lose his ability to be overwhelmed, taken, and awed. He might, Sisyphus-like, be consigned to renew each day his desire to live and to love. Overwhelmed as I am still with the unique and sacramental quality of the drug, and with its awe-full aspect, I can scarcely believe that it is used for kicks or for temporary euphoric after-effects.

For me, the experience was intensely polar. It was as physically agonizing as it was excruciatingly beautiful, as hellish as it was heavenly. During the time that I was most ecstatic, I was least in control of my actions and my thoughts. When these sensations were most paradisaical, I felt most consigned to Hell. During my trip I thought repetitively of Don Juan's reason for choosing heaven and rejecting hell—to be in hell is to drift, to be in heaven is to steer. Yesterday I would not for an instant have chosen to steer. Yesterday I could effectively desire only what *was*. Today I would not choose to drift. I would not choose to drift even in a state of ecstasy. I would not choose madness.

Pleasurable sensations were opposed equally by painful sensations. (Physical pain is not a usual reaction to LSD and may have been due to an adulterative or my hypersensitivity.) During the height of the experience I saw flowers grow, flat surfaces reveal their depth and grain, and rocks glow. The atmosphere seemed layered, crystalline, and rosy-hued. Between myself and Mt.

Tamalpais in the distance, shimmering planes of light appeared, each plane transmitting to all its delicate, individual hue. When I closed my eyes, the heat and light of the sun further melted my boundaries. I felt ravished by a cosmic consciousness, possessed by crescendos of sound and geometric patterns of brilliant color. Accompanying these marvelous erotic and visual sensations, and simultaneous with them, I felt severe pain and vertigo. I was starved but could not eat. The more I tried to eat a peach the more involved I became in the blood-red color of the pit, the velvet texture of the fruit, and the rainbow-hued juice dripping on my leg. I experienced every nuance of ravenous hunger, and could do nothing to monitor or satisfy my needs. Such food as I did manage to swallow increased nausea without decreasing hunger. The pain and nausea abated only when the experience passed its peak.

Hallucinatory visions were optional on my trip. That is, I was conscious of their physical sources and knew that they were drug induced. For several hours I could see across the Bay, at the Crest of Mt. Tamalpais, an endless stream of pilgrims, each carrying a torch, mount the upper curve of the hill and disappear into the sun. However, the pilgrims could, responsive to my will, revert to the points of sunlight which were their source. I did not produce auditory hallucinations at all. However, I reacted strongly to recorded music, and in fact my ecstatic feelings and visual sensations and visions appeared dependent upon the mood and volume of the music being played. I was conscious of beat and melody but not of words. I felt a craving for sound, and became agitated while records were being changed.

A psychologically trained observer would have noted schizophrenic-like behavior. I was at times intensely bothered by paresthetic sensations. My skin seemed to creep. I felt wriggling things on my tongue, which I would try to remove until jolted into a realization that nothing external caused the bizarre effects. I froze into catagonic postures, in order to minimize vertigo and facilitate assimilation of the ever-changing kaleidoscopic patterns. I saw the universe as though through a prism with high magnification. The slightest variation in my status altered completely the ground on which I focused. The polished wood floor appeared richly textured; each variegated layer transmitted its own light and reflected the light of layers contiguous with itself. The ground enfolded the figure which I was. Sometimes I became the ground and felt myself enfolding another object which I then beheld, being at the same instant viewer and viewed, both creator of the vision and beholden to the vision for its motion. (There is a joke among users that it takes a

hippie four hours to go to the grocer, and no wonder, with all that going on. The schizophrenic may feel the same way.) Because of the creeping sensations and the magnification of skin pores and spots of dirt, I wanted to spend a great deal of time washing my hands. I soon gave that up as a waste of time, but I continued to be preoccupied with the appearance of my hands. I was dismayed by the smudges on my palms and entranced by the rainbows which trailed my fingers.

After about three hours, delirium and noncontrol gave way to controlled visions and a sense of power and well-being. I could talk coherently, and then volitionally lapse into ecstatic visions and visual imagery. However, the return of some control and the sharp diminution of physical pain signalled the end of ecstasy and the beginning of an enjoyable high. For about the next eight hours I could still elicit the light show and the visions, but the experience was no longer as singular, ecstatic or agonizing. My most important experiences were profound gratitude to my attendants for their excellent care, reverence towards those animate and inanimate objects with whom I shared the universe, and an intense joy in being alive.

Late the same day I wrote as follows.—Yesterday was the most singular of my life. While not the most profitable it is the one I would least give up. I cannot evaluate what I experienced but I value it above all other days. It was *my* day. I was in contact with the motion of the universe. I saw the world out there as it would appear if human beings possessed a nervous system infinitely more sensitive and exquisite than they do normally. I felt the action of my own nerve cells. How joyous and self-contained are the objects of this earth! Yet how well each articulates with the other. I never imagined before that the world could get on so well without me or that, without my purposive action upon it, all is joyous play. The distinction between the animate and the inanimate which once seemed highly relevant now seems to be irrelevant. The motion is the thing. I can appreciate best the slower motion of the inanimate. People are the least beautiful objects in this world because their movements are staccato and their countenances troubled by the actions of their wills. Only the man whose actions are deliberate and reserved, whose body is relaxed, whose spirit is tranquil, and whose gaze is gently curious, not intrusive, seems as beautiful to me as other objects on this earth. Although the LSD experience is like no other I have ever had, its effects by today resemble other peak experiences—noninvolvement with work in favor of self-absorption, intense awareness, appreciation, alert passivity, and great joy in my aliveness. I feel that it is a beautiful universe,

fruitful and dynamic, and I want to do what I can to keep my space fresh and replenished. I have no desire to take action or to be with people. It is good that it is Sunday and I can be alone, and that nothing will be demanded of me because it is still my time and I have nothing I want to give anybody else.

THREE DAYS AFTER THE EXPERIENCE

I have resumed my duties. While I react and respond well I have no desire to initiate action. However, I can initiate action when I know I should, and to do so does not disturb my tranquility. My memory is poor and I am disoriented, but I don't mind because I am not demanding of myself more than I can do. I am serene and exceedingly happy. I still move slowly because there is so much to see. It is essential to have a home to return to, a well-developed consciousness to expand, and a well-loved self to cherish. Without these I should feel desolate about the return of my ego and the loss of my visions.

FOUR DAYS AFTER

I am still tranquil and joyous. However, I am relinquishing my peak state in order to return fully to my work and children. This is a voluntary choice because I could easily give up my work and children without guilt or anxiety and lead another life, a life which has always been dear to me—that of a writer, contemplative and sensuous. However, I wish to honor prior contracts, and I know that my normal life has its own excitement and rewards. But I do feel a craving to renew the drugged state, to reenter paradise with all its pain. (What I thought of on the trip as hell accompanied by paradisaical sensations I now think of as paradise accompanied by pain.) I desire the company of users (although I will not seek it), because I wish nostalgically to recall paradise. I understand why drug users seek each other out and huddle together in a tribe. I understand their desire for the brilliant colors, strobe lights, surrealist songs, painted countenances, and other such pale reflections of the way the universe appears when stoned. My craving to return to the drugged state and to seek the company of users is opposed by a greater aversion to doing so. This aversion is a product of my normal dislike of escapism, and a mystic-like conviction that an experience so incomparable must not be chosen for trivial reasons nor engaged in with hedonistic intent, nor recalled with sentimentality.

SEVEN DAYS AFTER THE EXPERIENCE

I am almost my normal assertive, evaluative, active, committed, critical, irritable self. I am annoyed because

my memory (never very good) is worse and my efficiency still somewhat impaired. I do not enjoy the tonus which I find necessary for constructive, organized, self-propelled work. I do not like to give up my euphoric and tranquil state. However, I welcome the return of my powers, the zestful involvement in hard work, and the fun of contentious interaction. My attitude towards daily pursuits continues more whimsical and optional. My eye is caught by objects of beauty or interest on the road, and I have slowed my pace so that I will have more chance to observe what I have not created. My attitude towards what I experienced is now more objective, and less appreciative. I find that I am still easily moved to feelings of gratitude and acts of compassion, especially towards the nonhuman. I need to be alone a great deal.

I learned a little about the inner life of the schizophrenic and a great deal about the values, customs, and motives of hippies. I have not become wiser, more profound, more productive or more loving. I do know better where I stand in relation to other creatures of this universe. I remain content to do my thing well, even though I now know how small a part I play in the grand scheme. I am even more aware of the great joy generated by religious and mystic experience. But I remain a realist and materialist. Acid gave me a chance to be reborn to an identity, different but previously valued. I chose to reject that option. The choice was never mine to make before.

THE HIPPIE WAY

The hippie way is congruent with the drug experience and not comprehensible without it. The hippie feels that every person must find out what his *thing* is and that one person's thing is no better or worse than another person's thing. One can be a psychologist or a drummer, a guru or a carpenter, a bead-stringer or a head-shrinker. The central ethic is *noninterference*, appreciation and where possible facilitation of the thing done by the other—by a person, an animal, a stone or a flower. (The modal hippie, of course, does not live up to his ethic any more or any less than anyone else.) While on a trip the user is awed by the marvelous beauty and perfect organization of the physical world. It may seem natural to elect later as an act of reverence to remain a silent and passive observer of the life process, responsive only to the immediate needs of a member of the tribe. During a trip a user feels in touch with the cosmic consciousness. This may leave him with an imperturbable conviction that he possesses a uniquely valid insight into reality. Others of his tribe may in return for the same consideration support him in his conviction. While drugged, the user is extremely *passive, non-*

evaluative, unwilling, and tranquillized. It is difficult for him to relinquish this relaxed and joyous state in order to assume the creative tension necessary for sustained productive effort. Whatever problems the user had before his trip are still there when he comes down. He is less, nor more, able to deal with these problems because of memory loss, disorientation, and self-involvement. Understandably he depreciates the active, structured life for which he is now less fit, and values more highly the contemplative, appreciative life for which he is more fit and which he associates with drug euphoria. Unfortunately for the habitual user, he remains a child of society. What he deprecates consciously he overvalues unconsciously. He still wants status, belonging, and security but now looks to a reference group whose members, like himself, are predominantly in need. Agape, so fully shared on a good virgin trip, is simulated in communal life but its ersatz nature is apprehended by the hippie. Progressively, drugs are used not to expand consciousness but to escape confrontation with the fraudulent, demoralizing effect of the user's new reality. The fortunate few, the leaders in the hippie community, extend to their dependent brethren, *caritas*, thus achieving status and security in their society by the same means used in straight society, performance of socially useful work.

Hallucinogens benefit least and harm most the person who uses them as a way out of pain, or to find an identity. It is the person already depressed and anxious who can bear least well the descent which follows a high. It is the person with no sure sense of who he is and where he is going who is most harmed by the disorientation and heightened suggestibility which follows a trip. The person who is ineffectual, passive and weak, will find himself more incompetent after a trip. He may for awhile mistake euphoria for potency, and awe for wisdom. But inevitably he will come to doubt his illusory prowess and sink into greater lethargy and depression. The fearful, unstructured, immature personality is not benefited by becoming more appreciative, receptive, nonintrusive and tolerant. The person without an identity may never develop the competence, self-assuredness, and thrust to construct one if he seeks a solution in LSD.

The acid user may become more pacific and acceptant but he seldom becomes more loving. He gives away in order to receive. He develops an inordinate need to be needed, as a buffer against loneliness. Even when not promiscuous his choice of love object is indiscriminate, directed by immediate availability and reciprocal need rather than by personal love for a particular person. The marvelous erotic sensations which

may occur during the trip are in reality autoerotic, directed at a projected image of Him the Lover, or Her the Earth Mother. Eros while drugged is impersonal and ersatz, even when physically pleasurable, and eventually is experienced as fraudulent. While real individuals exist who are capable of sustaining a love both sacred and passionate, they are seldom found in the hippie community.

The habitual LSD user, desiring so much the authentic, is immersed in the ersatz. When drugged he pursues an illusory self-image in which he is potent, happy, and loving. When straight he tries to replicate the drug experience by means of surrealist songs, moire patterns, brilliant colors, rhythmic dances and exotic

costumes. With rare exceptions, and relieved by brief moments of euphoria, the habitual drug user is disillusioned and depressed. Death is the only mystery and hope remaining once the hallucinogens lose their power to inspire awe reverence. With continued usage they do lose their power.

Although the effects of LSD are revolutionary and therefore unpredictable, I feel that for the mature seeker the experience itself justifies the risk. The seasoned traveler seeks out the novel and the dangerous. The trip produced by the hallucinogens is singular and incomparable. I recommend it especially to the mature, intolerant, willful, self-centered person with a directed conscience and consciousness.