

Opening the Doors of Perception

Written by James Fadiman

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The date is early in 1966. Four of us are seated around a table, called out from the session room for a moment to respond to the contents of a special delivery letter. Back in the room, four men are lying on couches and cushions, eyeshades blocking out the daylight, hearing a Beethoven string quartet on stereo headphones. Each man, a senior scientist, had taken 25 micrograms of LSD-25—a very low dose—about two hours earlier. Two of these men are working on different projects for Stanford Research Institute, another for Hewlett Packard, the last is an architect. They are highly qualified, highly respected, and highly motivated to solve technical problems. Each one brought to this session several problems that he had been working on for at least the past three months and had been unable to solve. None had any prior experience with psychedelics. In another two hours, we plan to lift their eyeshades, take off their headphones, turn off the music, and offer them finger food, which they will probably not touch. We will help them focus on the problems they came in to solve. They are the fifth or sixth group we have run. The federal government has approved of this study. It is an experimental use of a "new drug," a drug still under review and not available commercially.

In 1966 there were about 60 projects around the country actively investigating LSD-25. Some were therapeutic studies: one at UCLA showed remarkable success in getting autistic children to communicate again; others were working with animals from monkeys to rats to fish, even with insects. Spiders, it turned out, make radically different web designs when given different psychedelics. A year or two earlier there had been a disastrous experiment when psychiatrist Jolly West gave an elephant enough LSD, it is fair to say, to kill an elephant. It did. The dose was several hundred thousand times what any human had taken or would ever take. While it made a brief media splash, the disaster did not seem to stop the research going on worldwide. Sandoz Pharmaceuticals in Basel Switzerland, the developer of LSD-25, had recently made available summaries of the first 1000 human studies. LSD-25 was the most studied psychoactive drug in the world. It was remarkable in two ways. One, it was effective in micrograms (millionth of a gram doses). This made it one of the most potent substances ever discovered. Two, it seemed to have the effect of radically changing perception, awareness, and cognition but not in any predictable way. These results seemed to be dependent not only on the drug effects, but equally so on the situation of the subject—what they'd been told about what they were going to experience under the drug and, even more interesting to science, the mind-set of the researcher, whether or not he or she had communicated a point of view to the subjects in any given study.

In short, here was a substance whose effects depended in part on the mental expectations of both subject and researcher. Often people in the studies had experiences that appeared to be deeply therapeutic, blissful and life changing, religious in content or mystical, but they also might have experiences that were profoundly disturbing, confusing or terrifying. The after-effects of the experience looked more like learning than simply the passage of a chemical through the brain and body. LSD was the genie in the bottle and there were bottles of it all over the country and a

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growing number outside laboratories and research institutions as well.

When that special delivery letter came from the Food and Drug Administration, none of us yet knew that many of the early conferences of LSD researchers had been sponsored by foundations that were covertly funded by the CIA, or that the United States Army had been giving psychoactive substances to unsuspecting members of the military, prisoners, even some of their own staff. Nor did we know that every project in the country, except those run by the military or intelligence agencies, had received a similar letter on the same day. Sitting in Menlo Park, in the offices of the International Foundation for Advanced Study, we four plus a small support staff were running the only study designed to test the hypothesis that this material could improve the functioning of the rational and the analytical parts of the mind. We were trying to find out if, instead of being diverted into the amazing inner landscape of colors and forms or into the adventures of mystical exploration or psychopathological terror, LSD-25 might be used to enhance personal creativity in ways that could be measured.

There had been a string of very successful studies in Canada showing that LSD administered in a safe and supportive setting led to a high rate of curbing long-term alcoholics' drinking. Other studies conducted in Southern California by Oscar Janniger showed that artists' work changed radically during an LSD session and often was changed thereafter. However, it was an argument in the art world, and in the science world, if that art was "better." Our team wanted to see if another aspect of the creative—technical problem solving—could be helped by the use of these agents.

The answer thus far in our study was a resounding "yes." We were amazed, as were our participants, at how many novel and effective solutions came out of our sessions. Client companies and research institutions were satisfied with the results (if not fully informed of how they occurred). Other members of research groups, one whose members had worked with us, were asking to be included in the study. It was a deeply satisfying time.

The letter from the FDA was brief. It advised us that at of the receipt of this letter, our permission to use these materials, our research protocol, and our capacity to work with these materials in any way, shape, or form was terminated.

I was by far the youngest member of the research team, a graduate student at Stanford in a psychology department that I'd not informed about this research. Two of the others were full professors of engineering at Stanford in two different departments, and the fourth was the founder and director of the foundation, a scientist in his own right who'd retired early and set up a nonprofit institute to better understand the interplay between consciousness, deep personal and spiritual experiences, and these substances.

Very soon we would need to go back into that room where the four men lay, their minds literally expanding. I said, "I think we need to agree that we got this letter tomorrow." We went to our subjects, now the last group of people who would be allowed the privilege of working with these materials on problems of their choosing with legal government support and supervision for at least the next 40 years.

One example of the kinds of results we were seeing did come out of that last session. The architect had bought in a project to build a small shopping center. The client had not liked his earlier designs and he was stuck. In the session, he saw the project, completed, and in his mind was able not merely to envision it but to walk around inside it, to see the size and shapes of bolts, to count the number of parking spaces, etc. The design he came up with was approved by his client and he spent the next few weeks doing the drawings that corresponded to the project he had already seen in its finished state.

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How did I come to be in that room at the International Foundation for Advanced Study when only a few years before I'd been a writer, living in Paris in a sixth floor walk-up, living on as little as possible, sleeping in train stations and hostels when I traveled and staying with whoever would put me up and feed me? As was said of many of our lives then, it was a long strange trip.

What sent me from Paris to Stanford and headlong into psychedelic research was not just a visit from my favorite college professor, Richard Alpert (later known as Ram Dass) and his friend, Timothy Leary, but also a cordial note from my draft board asking about my whereabouts. I realized that there was an M-1 waiting for me to cradle it across my elbows while crawling through mud and dank vegetation in Vietnam while overhead shots were being fired in both directions, giving me the chance of dying by enemy or friendly fire. In my mind, neither of those choices made sense, so I returned to the United States to the draft deferment haven of graduate school.

For the good of the military and for the nation, I was sure then and am now that keeping me out was the better alternative. When you have a long history in junior high and high school of being picked last for team sports, you don't assume that you will thrive in the infantry, let alone rise to the higher level of competence needed in actual combat. I saw my government fellowship to study psychology as the government saying that it was better to keep me out than to deal with any potential hazards to others and myself it risked by inducting me.

Why I plunged into psychedelic research, however, did begin with that visit from Alpert and the first night we spent together.

Paris, 1961. I'm sitting at night in a cafe on the Boulevard St. Michael, watching all the people who in turn are watching me. I'm twenty-one and have just taken psilocybin for the first time, and I've no idea what it is or does, but I know that the man sitting next to me is my favorite professor, Dr. Richard Alpert, who has given it to me as a gift. The colors are getting brighter, peoples' eyes are flashing light when they look at me, the noise is playing inside me like a multi-channel broadcast. I say, as evenly as my quavering voice allows, "It's a little too much for me." Richard Alpert grins at me from across the tiny round glass table. "Me too, and I've not taken anything."

We return to my walk-up a few blocks away. The hotel has a plaque to the side of the front door that says that Freud stayed there. I am writing a novel and sometimes imagine that in the future, they will add a second plaque. But not tonight.

I lie down on my bed, Alpert takes the chair. (That about uses up the space in the room.) I watch my mind discovering new aspects of itself. Alpert keeps letting me know that whatever my mind is doing is safe and all right. Part of me is not sure what he is even talking about, another part knows how deeply right he is, another part of me hopes he is.

One week later, I left Paris and followed Alpert and Leary to Amsterdam, where they joined Aldous Huxley to jointly present a paper to an international congress. Leary and Alpert were working together teaching psychology at Harvard and were already in the midst of controversy over giving psychedelics to graduate students and other members of the academic community. Six weeks after their conference, I was flying to California to begin graduate work in psychology.

While at Stanford, I led three lives. In life one, I wore a sport coat and tie, and made sure I showed up every day in the psychology department, visibly a student doing what he could to learn from the lips of the masters. In my second life, two days a week, I was a research assistant at the off-campus International Foundation for Advanced Study. There I sat in on daylong, high-dose (and legal) LSD therapy sessions. Each client had at least two people

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supporting their experience during the day. A man and a woman stayed with every client (male and female energy seemed helpful), plus there was a physician who checked into the session now and then, and was there if needed. I can't recall when we ever had any simple medical needs but it added to the feeling of total support and reassurance that made the LSD sessions more beneficial. In addition, a Freudian psychoanalyst had met with each client when he or she first volunteered for our program to determine if each person selected was likely to benefit and unlikely to run into problems beyond their ability to cope. Given the government's skittish stance at the time, the analyst told us we needed to have close to a 100% cure rate, something not demanded nor achieved by any other therapy. My third life was spent with the people who revolved around Ken Kesey. They used psychedelics of all sorts, as well as uppers, downers, marijuana, even alcohol and cigarettes. One member worked for a pharmaceutical chain and arrived at any event with his pockets stuffed with samples.

It was a group of outlaws, but not lawbreakers—more like paradigm breakers. LSD and many of the other drugs were not illegal in the early 1960s, but their use, especially outside any research or medical setting, was not socially acceptable. These explorers of inner space were doing field research, exploring what it was like to have free access to these drugs outside of any control or restraint except self-preservation. During these times, when these drugs were opening doors all over one's mind, the Kesey group used psychedelics while playing, singing, drawing, watching TV, cooking, eating, making love, watching the stars spin and dance, and asking aloud the sorts of questions their experiences brought up:

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- Who are we, really?
- Is the soul mortal or immortal?
- What did Blake or Van Gogh or Plato really experience?
- Is my identity inside my body or does it interpenetrate my body and yours?
- What is common between my mind and the nearest redwood tree?
- Were time and space subjective?
- What was fixed? What moved?
- What stayed constant from session to session (that is, what was remembered)?
- What happened in a group where all the minds were opened, loosely linked, and apparently in telepathic communication with one another? When someone in such a group becomes terrified, do the rest get sucked into the down draft? Or can the combined weight of the other minds right the one who has fallen away?

These questions and more were at the heart of the Kesey group's experience. Not outlaws, but outliers. Better to think of them not as the cultural icons they eventually became but as people who had outgrown the limitations of the laws and were furiously developing a bigger set of laws to bring order to their own larger sphere of behavior and experience. It sounds philosophical and it was, but it also had all the raw immediacy of putting your arm across the throat of a

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drowning swimmer so he or she doesn't panic, drag you underwater, and kill you both.

For me, a critical moment happened one morning at the edge of the Pescadero town dump. Pescadero is a tiny town two miles from the California coast about 15 miles from Stanford. The dump is a hillside, the bottom of which was littered but the top and sides were covered with vines sporting small patches of wildflowers. One dawn I went there with Ken Kesey and his girlfriend at the time, Dorothy, a woman who would later become my wife (after 40 years of marriage, we think it will probably last). The night before, she'd taken some LSD ("dropped acid," to say it the way it was) and was in a state of delighted wonder at the personal discoveries she was making about her own consciousness and how it shaped and reshaped her world. Ken had taken us to Pescadero because it was a wonderful place to meet the dawn. It is correct to say he took Dorothy there, but because I had been guiding her through parts of the night, she wanted me along.

I was not in the inner circle of the Kesey world. I was too straight and too unwilling to take drugs with everyone. None of the women in the group were interested in me, and I had not much in common with any of the men. However, as I worked with LSD by day and legally, I was welcome as an odd ornament, as might one want to have someone around who trained tigers or who could chew broken glass.

Dorothy recalled that the defining moment of that dawn came when she was about to step on a small flower. Instead, she lay down on the path and stared at it. I suggested she let the flower do the communicating. What she saw—not thought or contemplated but saw, such was LSD's curious power—was the flower fully open up, go through its cycle and wither, but also she watched the flower reverse this same flow, recovering from its dried state, re-flowering and returning to being a bud. She could see it go in both directions, forward and backward in time, dancing its own birth and its own death. When she said what she was seeing, I confirmed that her experience was one others had shared. Relieved, she returned to her plant contemplation.

She looked up at Ken—handsome, rugged, talented, a natural leader, possessed of enormous energy and power. Also married. Ken had two kids; he was fully committed to the marriage and also to having it open to other partners as well. Dorothy looked at me. I was engaged, but my fiancée was 6000 miles away in Scotland. What she did see was that I seemed very knowledgeable, even comfortable, about her newly discovered inner world. From the moment of the encounter with the flower, her gyroscope began to spin away from Ken and turn toward me. Our courtship and marriage is outside this moment in time but as one can trace a river back to a small spring coming from a cleft in a rock on a mountainside, our three lives shifted that day through the lessons that arose from Dorothy's encounter with a single flower.

What about my legal research? What was it like to do legal drug research? Since the Sixties, on most college campuses, it is no trick to find a psychedelic drug, take it, have a wild ride, and to wonder about it all. To give it to people in a setting so supportive that 80% of our subjects reported that it was the single most important event of their lives—ah, that was a different time. For more than two years while the experiments were going on, I'd slip away from Stanford classes when I could and sit with people who were having their introduction to psychedelics and, through psychedelics, to other levels of consciousness, and perhaps to other levels of reality.

Since I was usually introduced as "a graduate student who will be with us today," I was not primarily responsible for conducting the session. I was truly a sitter and could watch, sometimes help, and sometimes record what people reported as they went through the events of the day. Sometimes I would only appear in the late afternoon, and take a person home for the evening.

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We found that while the effects of the LSD would have worn off after 8 hours, a person's newly found capacity to move in and out of different realities diminished, but did not stop until the client was too tired to stay awake. I often had the treat of being with people as they puzzled out the major events or insights of the day. I also helped them deal with their families, who were usually baffled by the combination of tales of bizarre inner experiences and the sense of being with someone, a husband or wife, who was so totally open and loving and caring that it often brought the spouse to joyful tears.

By day, in my graduate studies, I was being taught a psychology that seemed to me to cover only a small fragment of the mind. I felt as if I were studying physics with teachers who had no idea that electricity, atomic power, and television existed. I would listen, take notes, ask appropriate questions, and would try to appear as if I were not dumbfounded by the tiny little nibbles my instructors seemed to assume was the whole of the apple of knowledge. By night, having completed my school assignments, I would read books that helped me to piece together the larger world I'd been opened to: *The Book of the Dead*, the *I Ching*, the works of William Blake, Christian mystics, and Buddhist teachings, especially those of the Zen masters whose cutting-through-it-all clarity was wonderfully refreshing. I also struggled with Tibetan texts that were hard to comprehend, but clearly had been written by people who knew about what I was discovering. I would sit and read those books wrapped in plain covers the way one had wrapped dirty comics in *Look* magazine in high school to hide pictures of women with amazingly large breasts from one's teachers.

When I could no longer follow the texts I would sit, cross-legged, on the bare linoleum floor of my graduate student "office," which was in a trailer turned temporary classroom. The space was even smaller than my bedroom in Paris. I'd look through the sliding glass door at a small pine tree planted to deny the fact that we were in a temporary trailer in a large parking lot. I would breathe and stare, breathe and stare until the tree began to breathe with me. It would not move nor sway, but would begin to shine with an invisible illumination, the fact of it extremely alive. It would grow and shrink before my eye, a very tiny movement, but reminiscent of the flower at the Pescadero dump. I'd attune to that tree until I felt balanced again and then go home to bed.

A Moment of Reflection

A few months after we ended our research program, California passed a law declaring the possession or distribution of LSD to be a crime. Federal policy concerning LSD was later consolidated with the enactment of the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act of 1970.

Why did our drug research frighten the establishment so profoundly? Why does it still frighten them? Perhaps, because we were able to step off (or were tossed off) the treadmill of daily stuff and saw the whole system of life-death-life. We said that we had discovered that love is the fundamental energy of the universe and we wouldn't shut up about it.

Christianity, for example, says come to the Father through Me, and be forgiven sins (even those you had not committed) and be loved without reservation. FREE. FREE. FREE (as if that alone wouldn't make you look underneath to see where the price tag has been hidden).

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Once you have declared yourself to be a Christian, however, you find church authorities saying that the actual price of being forgiven includes admitting that you are not only unworthy, but you are very, very unworthy and there is no way you will ever get to worthy on your own hook.

What we found out was that the love is there, the forgiveness is there, and the understanding and compassion are there. But like water to a fish or air to a bird, it is there all around and without any effort on our part. No need for the Father, the Son, the Buddha, the Saints, the Torah, the books, the bells, the candles, the priests, the rituals, or even the wisdom. Just there—so pervasive and so unending that it is impossible to see as long as you are in the smaller world of people separated from one another. No wonder Enlightenment is always a crime.