

THE ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: THE LSD TRIP

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[Warning: The following is a graphic account of an LSD trip and may not be something you want to read about, in which case please don't]

The definitive experience during my year in Berkeley was taking LSD, acid. In the end I was not sure what it was that I was taking; almost no one did that early in the scene. It was May 6th, 1964. I was intrigued (we all were) by the drug. More important, and the final impetus to take acid, is that I had reached a point in my life (a very tight place) where I really needed an alternative view. The stories I had heard were that LSD could provide that, whatever else it was. Something had to give and in the end I was willing to take a chance. Still, I was very nervous and worried about what I might do if I took acid, lost control, and then: what? I had no idea and neither did most folks that I spoke with, and I had asked around.

I took LSD in a cube of sugar in the men's bathroom of a small coffee shop in Berkeley California on May 6th, 1964 around 10:30 PM. It was pure Sandoz acid, and at the time I had heard of no other kind. I was with Mary, an almost girlfriend of several weeks whom I had met at Lucas Books where I worked part time. We had never really gotten past the foreplay stage, because I didn't always have the nerve to push things to the point of real intimacy. It was basically a fear of rejection. It seemed I would persist almost forever (with these kind of questions in suspension) waiting for one of us to make a move, but not daring to take the plunge. I am certain some few of you will echo this.

We were given the key to a friend of Mary's house, where there was a record player and some albums. I chipped in 50 cents gas money to get a ride over to the place. The idea was for me to drop acid and listen to some serious music, something I might do on marijuana. This was Mary's idea, and a plan that seemed absurd to me from the outset—the idea of scheduling anything for this kind of experience. You see, I already had plans for acid, even if I knew nothing about it. Oddly enough, LSD is a drug that happens to be whatever you think it will be.

I had long been apprehensive about this particular drug. Of course I had tried pot, hash, uppers, and even opium. Acid, however, was different, if I was to believe the stories about it. I feared that it might permanently damage or affect me in some way—like make me insane or bring out whatever schizo elements that might be lurking somewhere in there. "In there" being everything I didn't know about myself. At the same time, I was intrigued at all of the possibilities of acid. And most of all, I was desperate for change. It seemed to me that my entire life had once again painted me into a corner, and I wanted out.

And then there is that fact that I hadn't really eaten for almost three days prior to dropping the acid and I was in the emotional chaos of the disintegration of my study plan with the professor I had been working with. Once again I could simply not follow any program of studies, and was back to square one. I also had an unsettling long-distance phone call the night before with my old friend and former house mate in Ann Arbor. All of these and very little sleep prepared me for this particular night in Berkeley, California. But I had backup. Mary had given her word that she would watch over me and keep me from all harm. We agreed that no matter what happened, no matter what I might say to her, she would not leave me.

When we arrived at the house where the phonograph was, a record was put on. As I looked around I could see that the house was in shambles—a complete wreck. I found this totally depressing, in fact disgusting to observe. To my chagrin, the driver decided to stay with us to listen to the music. I was immediately more than a little apprehensive about the extra (read stranger) person there and began to wonder did the two of them just want to watch what happened to me. Acid was still not all that common and everyone was curious. I was the only one tripping, and it was already too late to back out as I had taken the acid almost 45 minutes before.

The first effects of the acid were some heightening sensations similar to alcohol, like when you have had a little too much to drink and are on the verge of deciding if you are all right or going to be sick. Rising through and overcoming this feeling came a stranger sensation, one of extreme unrest that soon became too much to bear without relief of some sort, a slow shockwave rolling through the system. I was also realizing that I could be physically sick and so stepped outside. Mary followed.

I told Mary privately that I wanted to get away from the driver and out of this house. By that time I was realizing that this experience was not about to be as gross as the programmed music that Mary had in mind for me. Leaving the house, we drove back toward the Berkeley campus and were dropped off at the Café Mediterraneum on Telegraph Avenue, where I used to work. From there it was less than two blocks to my small apartment. I was quite buzzed by this point and beginning to feel (psychologically) very peculiar—a hostile/non-hostile sort of thing. It did not feel good. We entered my place and sat down.

At this point, I began to have vivid and pronounced hallucinations and an obvious projecting of animosity (or not, as the moment would have it) toward Mary. The same kind of feelings I had toward the driver were now directed toward Mary. She turned the small heater in the place on and declared that it was interesting to come to an understanding of one's own home. Such a comment was way too crude for me at that point. These were not welcome words and triggered the reaction that Mary had somehow planned or trapped me into facing myself, and, worse, was actually enjoying or studying all of this. I could feel being the object of observation in Mary's eyes. This actually was probably the case. I was not in the mood to be anyone's guinea pig, even my own.

I soon was pacing back and forth in the small room. I could not seem to remain in the lighted area of the room but, under pretext that it had become too warm, would dart into the smaller back room and lean out the alley door, breathing in the cool night air. Then I also opened the front door and began to make small sorties outside into the overhanging arbor. From this point on, this was (from my perspective) completely insane behavior on my part.

I would normally never leave the door open at night. And the sight of the door opening in the night, as seen from outside, with the light leaping out from it toward me, reflecting all of the leaves and the fuchsias was, well, eerie and a bit menacing. Inside was Mary and the light and the growing feeling of slight hostility. And, when back inside I found myself almost holding my breath and then dashing outside again to breath. Once outside, I never went far. I was afraid of what I might do to myself.

Outside the plants, and particularly the ground plants along the walkway, became a stream of waving arms with barbed points, glowing red and green, arms waving like sirens, beckoning me, but where?. And don't forget the fuchsias all around me, certainly a plant fit for one of Dante's circles. Their red and purple flowers became waving projections of letters, words — a ground

covered with a pattern of words. Scarlet letters. It was mad. My Catholic upbringing and imprint was in full sway.

I continued to slip in and out of the doorways, but I began also to experience the outside and inside in the same way, and not a nice way. It made less and less of a difference as the drug took hold whether I was in or out. The 'in' was out and the 'out' was in. There was no escape possible from my imagination. And yet this mad world was comfortable in a strange way. It was strangely familiar. It was 'my' mad world. Nothing seemed too strange. Frightening? Yes, but not really strange or unfamiliar. These were just the kind of things I was always afraid of... somewhere back in my mind. In fact, these are just the things I might have expected, if I knew what to expect, these things and not others. I was just naturally so very used to them.

I would slip into the cavern of the arbor outside from which I could look back and see the light from inside glowing and flinging itself from the door, rays of god-light piercing the darkness. The extensive arbor became a cave lit by fantastic florescent creature lights—waving comforting siren-like arms and tendrils. I would dash inside to say something to Mary and then dash back out again. I could not remember when I had said something to her or even whether I had really even been inside recently and, if so, how many times had I come in and back out. Differences blurred.

I also could not get beyond the front gate. I kept trying, but would always stop short of the street and return inside the room under the pretext of saying something to Mary, who appeared (in my eyes) more and more of an observer each time. I could see then that I don't take objectification easily. I am mostly subject.

My mental projections began to get way out of control. And I could see that I was projecting fantastic things, and that I saw what I wished and that any other person or event could be interpreted in bizarre numerous ways.

At some point, I began to chew on some bread and Mary had cut some salami, still sticking with her agenda of what she thought a guided trip should be like. I would grab a piece of something and run off with it to ravishingly chew like mad. I was not really feeling the chewing or anything, and only occasionally became aware after the fact that I was now or had been recently eating.

Inside became still more oppressive. I now vigorously resented Mary's presence and her comments more and more. She kept suggesting that I lie down and put out the light, which I refused to do. I kept inferring hostile motives to anything she said or I was embarrassed by her lack of subtlety. I felt she wanted me to really get the fear that I already felt approaching. When I just couldn't stand it anymore, I insisted that we had to walk outside.

Together we walked up toward campus. I had really developed an attitude by that time about Mary. She was just too coarse in approaching me. Whatever she said, I did something with in my mind, so that she became many different persons successively in relation to me. Sometimes she was loving, sometimes hateful, making fun, sadistic, not aware, aware—etc. Often I would try on several ways of interpreting a statement and see her change right in front of me, even though she had made but one statement. I also knew that I was doing all the arranging. The streets, the cars, people and colors were simply beyond description. The emphasis was not on the heightening of sensations such as with pot (although sensations were very vivid). Somehow vivid colors were way beside the point. The real focus was in the change and manifestations of the world, and of each object in it - rearrangements.

To see something undergo complete change in character depending on what I was projecting was indeed frightening. It was also fascinating and illuminating. I was learning more this evening about myself than I had in my whole life thus far. Sometimes walking a block would take an infinite period of time to cover, although the walking pace remained the same. At other times, it was gone in a second. I could walk and walk and still the block would never end. The speed anything traveled by varied tremendously. A shoe, a dress in a store, would become animate or would change personality. The five minutes it took to walk a block or so in Mary's time seemed to last, for me, at least an hour. Time was simply very arbitrary, seemed ambiguous, and was entirely dependent on me. And I was not dependable right then.

"Whose sense of time was real?" I thought. People that were passed in the street tended immediately to become stereotypes and adjust themselves to the various roles I projected, right in front of my eyes. An Asian walking by became a stereotypical 'chinaman', bobbing, fattening, and hunching, while across the street a dull lanky bookworm raced furiously by us. This was simply astounding for me to see.

All this walking toward campus had been free from the fears that had begun earlier at the apartment. Moving up Telegraph Avenue, we reached the student union at Bancroft Way, which immediately arranged itself like an artist's blueprint, with all the trees becoming exactly the same—cropped and geometrical. We continued on into campus. As we walked around the large central fountain Mary began to wander off, seeming almost to beckon to me. Once again I resented this and began to project anxiety on her part until she finally went and sat on a wall. I did not like to be manipulated in even the most subtle way. I was way subtler than that. I thought she was pretending to not know me. Perhaps I was behaving badly and didn't know it. Her face would appear to be like my own, but glowing a stereotyped boyish-girl look, foxily and cunningly leading me toward hell.

By this time, we were walking all over the inner Berkeley campus. Everything was fantastic. Somewhere along in here, I began to become more actively paranoid and to project that paranoia into everybody and everything. This was enhanced when we reached Berkeley's famous outdoor Greek theater. I, who had read all the classic Greek writings, went up and touched the marble front with the huge word "Greek" etched in it. I was terribly moved and I tried to go inside. The gate was locked. I rattled it. I was crushed and just couldn't understand why I was being locked out from the Greeks. This was, to me, a 'bad' sign and things kind of went downhill from here.

The whole persecution thing picked up. I began to almost hate Mary at times. Trees were waving their arms like calisthenics doing jumping jacks. The ground everywhere was littered in patterns of red letters. Grass and shrubs became tendrils red and grasping, holding, and tearing at my feet. Things loomed up ominously and then fell back again. The sky was shooting stars and falling heavens. Every car became a police car. Every person a policeman, complete in all the details.

An actual police car caused a scare once and I started to run. I felt time slow down as I tried to pick up speed, moving my (seemingly then) huge body from a standing start into motion. I could feel the wind moving past my face, wind created by my own motion. Mary urged me not to hurry, not to run. I stopped. I had a fantastic feeling of time changing depending on the speed I traveled. By this time I had more than enough of this state of panic and asked Mary to guide me home. She agreed and we started back.

This trip took forever. We walked and walked. When we finally reached the student union (only

a block or two), I wanted to just fall down because I couldn't face the four-block walk from there back to my place. I knew it would take positively forever. Forever!

I could see in my mind the complete physical distance home, all four blocks of it, and I knew that it had to be covered in this very mechanical way before I would be home—one eternal step after another. There was this problem with time, simply—the traveling of this mechanical distance. It could take forever. We walked and walked, with me constantly fearing policemen. I was still projecting hostile actions and intent on Mary, as if she were trying to get rid of me. Or, as if I was trying to get away from her.

A couple hurried down the other side of the street, jostling each other. They were a drunk black couple, very crude looking and very happy. They got into a car and I saw that there were a middle-aged white couple, and not particularly happy. My mind did that. Out there was in here. I was doing that, me.

As we walked, Mary pointed out a ram's head shape in a shop window, her face was glowing and smiling, now somewhat evil, menacing. I simply could not imagine how I could possibly go the last two blocks without being killed. Simply, how could anyone get two blocks and still be alive? It seemed that chance would destroy me or that my sense of time might stretch yet more and I would never be able to reach home, like the old conundrum of halving the distance to the finish line. Theoretically you never get there.

As it was, it seemed to take at least one and one half hours to go the last three or four blocks. This was in my time, which 'WAS' time for me. When we finally reached the gate to my house, I told Mary that I was fine and to leave me. No problem. She said goodnight and walked off into the night and disappeared. Her promise not to leave me under any circumstance was canceled by my simply mentioning her leaving. She left as soon as asked. It was my own strength of will that caused it. I said "Go!" and she skedaddled. Gone.

Although I had just asked her to leave, I was sad about how easily she just walked away, leaving me there in this state. Yet, I felt that I was fated for this and had realized by this time that no one could watch or prevent me from coming to harm because the harm was simply already in myself. There was no running farther and I felt myself closing in from all sides with a heaviness and a horror.

I walked slowly up the path to my door, which was still covered (more than ever) with red, blood-like waving, grasping plants – fuchsia. The light from my doorway illuminated the arbor and the entire entranceway with a fantastic radiance, a brilliant cave that called, lured, and beckoned me to what I could no longer run from. This was it, and I knew that I had arrived at the business end of this project.

The door opened to the dull and scattered light of the lamp. As it swung shut, I felt that I was entering into myself completely. And I knew that all of me was here, that I brought it with me. The inside was now the same as the outside, secure only from chance or authoritative intervention by the door. I was simply trapped. Suddenly there seemed to be no more hallucinations, or rather, if any, it was the hallucination of the dull heaviness and exact sameness of my room now having full sway.

I knew that I could not go out. I knew that I would now lie down and turn out the light. And I knew that I was alone in the largest sense of that word. I slowly removed my shoes, sweater, and pants, turned off the light, and crawled into bed. Darkness. And I reached up and opened

the small shutters above my head to let a slight light in from the outside alley. Then, lying there partially covered, things came to me all in one.

I felt my aloneness. I knew that all the running and the fear, everything that happened during that evening, was only myself. I had witnessed it. And I could never escape, for I brought it with me. There was nowhere to find a reprieve now, simply nothing anyone could do. Mary could hold me, protect me, but never could she or anyone protect me from this, my very self.

The thoughts continued to roll in—my relationship with Professor David, my delinquency in studying, and its sad ending, and then my attempt to go on alone in study, without a teacher. Now I could see the fruitlessness of this approach, since I now saw that it was not the study, not any particular subject that was the point. It was the teacher, the student, the working together, the mutual care about the work that made the difference. I was overcome with despair.

I realized that there was no one in the world who meant enough or could mean enough to help me if I could not even help myself. What, in a word, was happening was that the special something within me that I had valued all my life, my spirit, my soul, was trapped for the first time completely, and it was dying. Up until now, I had always used my quick mind to rationalize and escape these hard thoughts. It was easy to forget what I found so hard to remember.

This whole evening I had been dying. Not quickly and fast, but slowly, ebbing. I was withering away bit by bit, relinquishing hold after hold on the world. Letting it go. Letting it go on.

Fear was fantastic. I clutched and clung and cried and pleaded with myself. I felt it going, and finally allowed and OK'd its going. I knew that tonight I was going to die, that this was the end of my life. In fact, I was dying.

As I lay there on the small bed in the darkness of the room, I became aware of a peculiar feeling on my chest and arms. There is only one substance that is warm and wet with a special slipperiness, a quickness of feeling—blood. I was bleeding to death there on my cot. I thought that maybe, without knowing it, I had cut my wrists and didn't remember or want to know. I touched my wrists and realized that I was clawing and scratching at them. I madly tried to find the lamp switch, turned it on, and looked. I could see no blood. I turned the light out and lay back down.

But again I felt the slipperiness of blood, stronger now, and thought that perhaps I wouldn't let myself see it flowing. I jumped up before my strength was gone and turned on the overhead light. I stood before the cheap full-length mirror. The floor and the bed were covered with blood. I looked in the mirror and saw that I was, in fact, covered with blood. God, I was bleeding to death. Michael was dying. I felt weak. I had so little strength left. And I was already so exhausted.

I did not know how or when I had cut myself, but I obviously had, and I knew that I had very little time anymore to live. I was alone and dying far from anyone I cared for. In fact, there was no one I could think to ask. I had all the people I knew with me, there in my head, and none could help. Was I bleeding to death or did I just imagine that I was? I could not answer this myself. Anyway, what was the difference?

A thought occurred. Perhaps Professor David could tell me. Professor David, with whom I had argued many times, but for whom I did have respect. His reality somehow stood outside my own. I had not entirely compromised his relations with me, although even in that I hung on by a

thread. The professor had an independent opinion from me. If somehow I could get to his door, the professor alone would know the truth and would do what could be done (if anything was possible) to save me. He alone in all the world I trusted to judge the truth.

I frantically pulled on some clothes and rushed outside through the arbor and out into the street. Everywhere was blood. The outside world was also bleeding and dying. The world and I were dying completely alone, together. As I faded, the world faded with me. Fear had me to the death.

I began to have doubts about even the professor. I could not go to Professor David's. We were not even very friendly at that point. And I felt that I did not deserve any sort of reprieve. I deserved to die. I thought of Mary and started toward her house. But no, she could not tell me. She was already part of my world and that world was dying, was dying and bleeding to death. She was already within my world and therefore could not judge it. Was I in fact bleeding to death?

But there was perhaps one other world. Professor David's world was not my world. And, though I disagreed with the professor about all kinds of thing, I discovered that the bottom line was that I believed the professor's world could judge the death of my own. I hurried faster toward the professor's home. It seemed to take hours. Behind me was blood where my feet had stepped, a trail of blood. I felt weaker and weaker. Each car was the police who would prevent me from reaching the professor. I would bleed to death there in the street if they stopped me, and everywhere: scarlet letters. The sky was blood red, dripping and hanging there where it had been ripped apart. Plants and houses dripped and poured blood in torrents onto the street.

I would never make it. And it took hours and hours and hours. A car behind me overtook me after an unbearable length of time, pulled across my path and stopped. A huge black man waited there grinning at me and then pulled on into the driveway. I went faster. Time slowed.

Now, only a block away, I ran with my last strength up stairway after stairway. The highest lights were on in the professor's house. I rang the bell and slumped against the door. I then pulled away and stood there trembling. The door opened. It was the professor. I stammered something. I went inside where I tried to explain. Professor David did not seem to understand. He of course had no idea what was happening.

I told him I was bleeding, showed him, and watched the professor's face change again and again ... hostile, furious, helpful, kind. At one point I could see that the professor saw my bleeding, but was going to say nothing. He would let me die as I deserved. The professor seemed very impatient and kept asking me if I wouldn't have coffee as if to change the subject. I was horrified and broken. I prayed that I would not be left to die. Sometimes it seemed that the professor became mechanical, like a windup toy, sitting there jerking.

I slowly calmed down. In time, I was able to speak and we talked and I felt his words and thoughts and his heart. I saw that the professor still cared for me and that he accepted the entire Michael, including the bad-student, and not just the 'good' part of me. There were two forces within my mind fighting and I saw that these forces were within myself. They were two parts of me, parts not distinct, but spread over a million thoughts and decisions. These two forces were forced to face each other that night in Berkeley.

I saw these two opposite and hypocritical forces and had to admit them or die. They were there, part of me. I saw them and allowed that they both existed. They both were true at the same

time. I then began to become still calmer and clear, and saw for the first time into Professor David's eyes and soul, and at the same time, into myself. I saw that, aside from all the noise, I was clean, that I was honest, and that that part within me that I had always hoped was good and pure was in fact good and pure. I could see that I was a real and good person, one with an identity, and a fine one. I felt as strong as the professor and looked unerringly into his eyes. I was myself for the first time. There was a real me and I 'was' that, and it was good.

My self was a clear and a strong, tough thing. Indestructible. I was everything I had ever dared dream or hoped to be. I talked with the professor about our working relationship and I felt honest and clean—straight-forward. I was able to speak of all things, including our teacher-student relationship, my own failures and wrongs, my inability to enjoy studying. I could look at my quite ambiguous self and be unashamed of it. That was simply how it was, and I, Michael, admitted it for the first time.

Later that night I left the professor, who must not have known what was happening, and walked home. The world around me was also clear and clean. At home, I started to climb into bed thinking that I would sleep now and get up early to think about all of this. I stopped. No, that was what I always did, trying to save time, conserve time and energy, missing all the rewards. No. No sleep. I would have myself a sunrise and I dressed and went outside.

And the world was clear and clean. I walked and walked and the sun rose. I was thrilled, delighted. The world was everything wonderful. I passed an old man and said "Good morning!". The man replied "good morning." "A fine morning too," I added out loud. And it was.

I thought about many things and for the first time from the point of view of a subject, no longer just an object in the world, an object subjected to the world. I was a person, a subject in this world. I met different people and spoke freely and hard brilliant straight into their eyes. So many things I had learned about time, about my own romanticism, about the self. My tightly wrapped person and life had cracked and some light shone in.

The outer world that I had struggled with, the world of hard persons and ugliness was found to be none other than my own mind, my particular world. There were not two worlds, my personal view and the external world. On that acid night these two were seen to be one and the same. And I saw this in real time and accepted this as true. It changed things forever for me because I now knew that all of what I saw was part of my own mind, how I saw life. And it could change and be changed.

It was like a sailor discovering his sails. I suddenly was mobile for the first time. I could change myself and the things around me. I was no longer a victim, a masochist being dragged through life by external events. All that had changed through this experience. While I could not change all exterior events, I 'could' change how I received and viewed those events. I could change my mind. And I did.

From that day forward, I had a mission: to find out more about how the mind worked. I wanted to endlessly revisit those moments of insight and clarity I had experienced. I had imprinted on that particular night in Berkeley and from that moment on, I measured who I was from that time, from that experience. I was born.

My interest in the mind, the psyche, and all things psychological was peaked. I couldn't get enough of alternative culture—alternatives. I had experienced an alternative to everything I had known up to that point, and the comparison between this new experience and my life to that

point gave me a new life. I was changed.

Suddenly alternate points of view made a lot of sense to me. I immersed myself in anything out of the ordinary, anything that gave me a new perspective. My mind was open. I had experienced a radically new way of seeing myself and, with that part of my experience, I was a lot more willing to try other perspectives, including those of other people.

And so you have heard my first acid trip. Marijuana never interested me much, but I thought long and hard before I would take acid again.

