LSD: The Acid Test

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While marijuana permeated much of American culture, the psychedelic drug LSD remained more narrowly confined to hippies, college students, and those willing to push their psychic investigations further. Some saw LSD as the vehicle leading to new realities, and the organized events where the drug was taken took on something of a religious fervor. In the words of one LSD guru, Timothy Leary, one should "tune in, turn on, drop out." This was to be a revolution of consciousness equal to the political one seemingly underway, as well.

Exploring Inner Space

There are various ways of dropping out of our modern condition. One way is to visit or live in a country like Guatemala, which hangs onto its sanity by lagging a century or two behind. Another way out is psychosis although, on a long-term basis, is reported to be too lonely. Alcoholism suits many Americans, but is only makeshift. Marijuana smoking is growing in popularity. Other Americans toy with religious ecstasy, but usually not in a serious way.

Viable people really want out this time. They are willing to risk something. Some of them find revolutionary opportunities outside: they sit in, lie in, sleep in, teach in, think in. Others find scene inside: that is the radical way, for it breaks with our tradition of looking for salvation in deeds alone.

Exploring inner space is as revolutionary as exploring outer space. You risk a lot when you ingest LSD-25 (lysergic acid diethylamide tartrate). A young man told me that after he swallowed 250 micrograms of this agent, "my whole self flowed down from my head and between my knees and spread out in front of me, face up, like a deck of cards .... I think that if I had had time, I would have tried to pray, but there was nothing left in me even to pray with (or so I thought). I was scared shitless. Then, all of a sudden, I was inside an absolutely pure white light that softly held me up over an abyss. I guess in the showdown there is something that holds you up. I never cried since I was five years old, and that's the way I cried."

A middle-aged professor said: "I was fifteen feet above myself, looking down on myself in the chair reading a book."

During an LSD session, you are apt to feel like an explorer who landed on Mars with no return fuel. One San Francisco executive said that after ingesting 350 micrograms of LSD, plus about 300 milligrams of mescalin (which has a kindly effect): "The ceiling above me became a black sky filled with universes, red, white and blue, whirling at incredible speeds and interlocking with consummate accuracy. This was a very small part of what I thought of as The
System. The universes ran in perfect order through The System, faster than light flashes. I had a horrible realization that I was ceasing to exist. I looked around for my LSD guide, and I perceived him as the Manager of The System, who made it all and controlled it. A very beautiful religious experience happened to me then, that I don't want to talk about today. I wept for all the people I have hurt in my life, including myself. ...

Me Instead of “Mother”

Young people accept LSD as a fact of the times. They are fed up with being latent human beings. The purpose behind their experiments is to find the humanity they were cheated of by ersatz education, electronic conditioning, and living in families led by synthetic productions labeled "mother" and "father."

Older people seem to prefer to try to deal with the quality of modern life by addiction to alcohol or television. Younger people prefer more awareness. You don't have to ingest LSD or peyote or psilocybin or belladonna to have your mind expanded. Last spring, at a symposium on LSD at the Esalen Institute of Big Sur Hot Springs, on the California coast, a young pediatrician rose to declare: "I have never taken LSD, but it's changed my whole life." He had "turned on" only by listening to the rapt talk of those who had crossed the psychedelic frontier, and by being gazed at from eyes made big-seeming and luminous from having seen with extra dimension.

Nicolas Berdyaev has written (in The Divine and the Human) that in "the new revelation of the Holy Spirit ... consciousness passes into super-consciousness and a world is revealed which lies beyond the sphere in which subject and object fall apart." This is an inadvertent definition from a deeply religious man of a much-reported experience of unity while under the influence of LSD. They usually return to the workaday world with a distrust of words which seem quite unable to retrieve the values perceived during the trip. When they try to use words about it, they hear themselves being called "kooky"; or if they are taken seriously, they find that the words they choose merely confuse or annoy. "I never try to tell people about it any more," said one traveler from inner space. "Can you tell a blind man what a sunset really is? Can you explain in words what lobster tastes like? What can you say about love to a man who has never been in love?"

The plight of the returned travelers can be summed up in this statement by one of them:

"Suppose I dig Beethoven's 15th Quartet—all the nuances—the phrases that are exquisite to the edge of torture, the fern-filled, adagio recesses, the tender, demonic violin screaming that drives you wild, and suppose I dig William Blake and Miles Davis and Giotto and the chess play of Reshevsky and the sublime arc of Willie Mays' arm throwing to home
plate. Now suppose I got this way all at once in six hours, by taking LSD.

"I try to tell you that you, too, must do what I did, taking LSD, so that we can come in level, but this makes you so mad that we just stop being friends at all.

"It sounds snobbish, doesn't it? It's not. It's democratic. Join us!"