

THE MEDICINE OF HISTORY

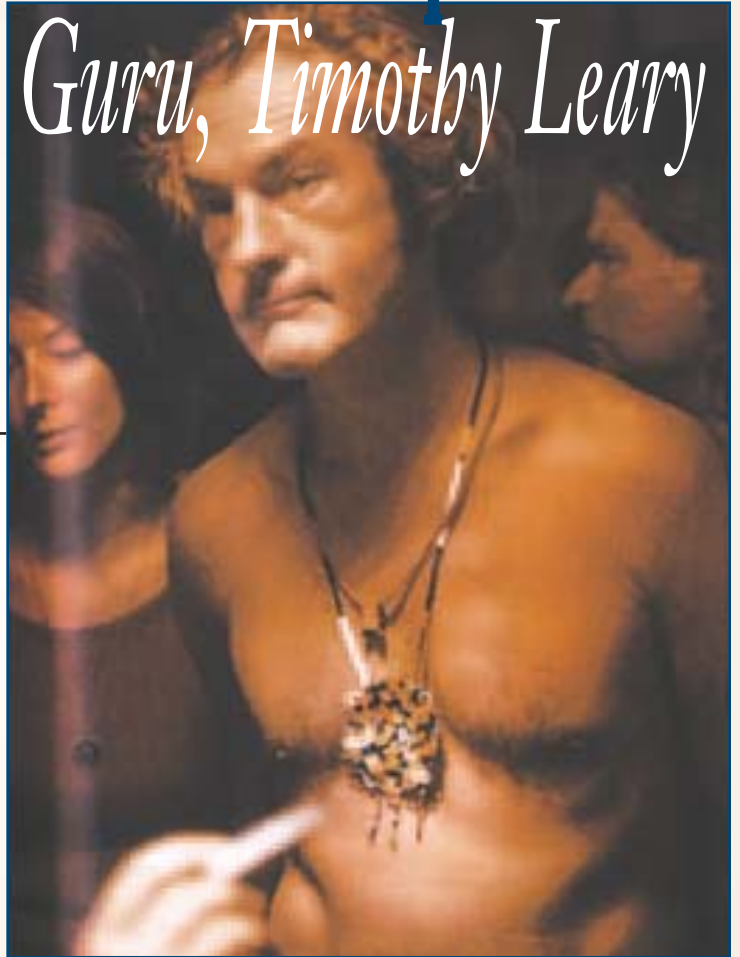
“Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out!” *The Life of Acid Guru, Timothy Leary*

By Lawrence Segel, MD

Anyone who lived through the 1960s and 70s will have no trouble identifying Timothy Leary as the author of the popular aphorism: “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”. But, who was Timothy Leary?

Many of us will remember him as the Acid Guru, the man who brought psychedelic drugs into the mainstream of North American culture and extolled others to turn on, tune in, drop out. Others will think of him as a visionary, futurist, libertarian, drug salesman, ladies’ man, huckster-scientist, media-whore or the greatest philosopher of the 20th century. President Richard Nixon ironically dubbed him as “The Most Dangerous Man in America.”

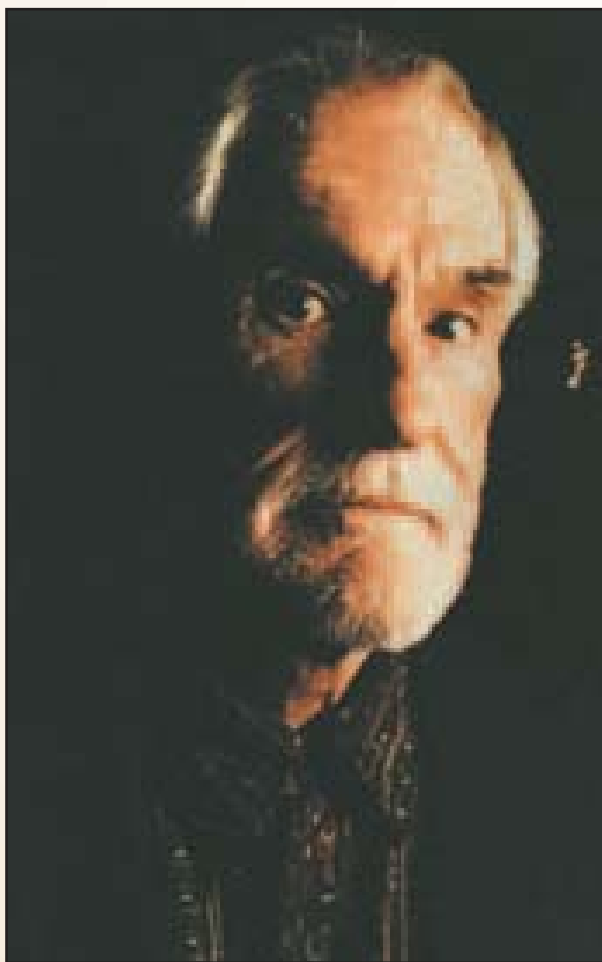
Timothy Leary was born on October 22, 1920, in Springfield, Massachusetts. He was brought up in an Irish-Catholic household. His father was a dentist and



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a captain in the U.S. army and his mother was a school teacher. Early on, Leary tried following in his father's footsteps by attending West Point Academy. Obviously not suited for a military career, he left after 18 months. He continued

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his studies at the University of Alabama and received his bachelor of arts in psychology in 1942. Upon graduation, he served as an army psychologist in a hospital unit in Pennsylvania until the end of the war, then returned to study at the University of California at Berkeley, finishing with a PhD. Leary was Director of Psychological Research at Berkeley University in the 1950s, but accepted a posting at Harvard in 1958.

In 1960, while on holiday in Mexico with a group of wandering colleagues, he tried the mind-altering drug psilocybin. This was to change his life forever. In describing the drug's awe-inspiring effects, he said: "In four hours by that swimming pool in Cuernavaca I learned more about the mind, the brain, and its structures than I did in the preceding fifteen as a diligent psychologist." He unhesitantly decided to dedicate the rest of his life as a psychologist to the systematic exploration of this new "instrument."

The Psychedelic Drug Research Program

Building on those experiences in Mexico, he set up the Psychedelic Drug Research Program at Harvard — the premise being that psychedelic drugs could be used as expanders of human consciousness, thereby revolutionizing the fields of psychology

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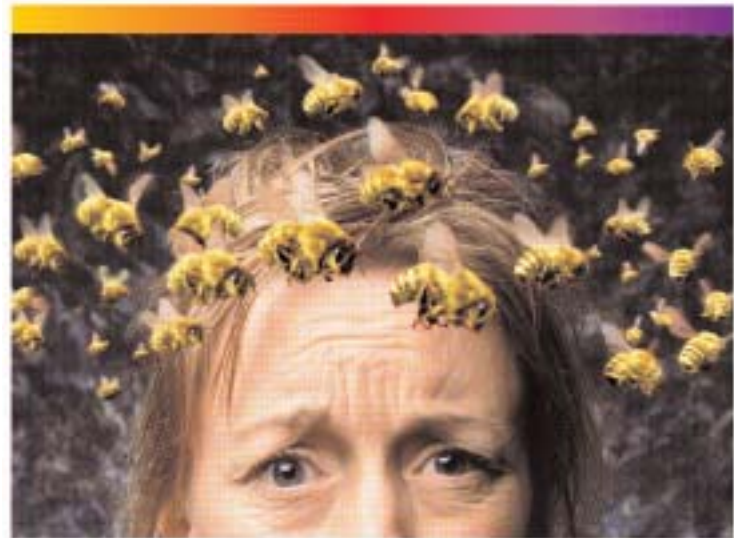


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and philosophy. Leary was joined in his work by such notable men as Aldous Huxley, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. By 1961, more than 200 subjects had been administered the drug. From 1961 to 1963, Leary conducted the Concord Prison Experiment, where 32 informed, consenting inmates were given psilocybin in an attempt to suspend psychological “imprints,” or prison mentality. The hope was that use of the drug would allow a critical period of new imprinting to be established, leading to a “conversion experience.” The monitored end point was the rate or prevention of recidivism. Although the initial results were promising, long-term follow-up was disappointing.

Leary’s LSD Trip

Leary’s drug experimentation then moved on to lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). The

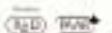


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press started to run stories of drug scandals at Harvard, resulting in the university “regretfully” expelling Leary in 1963. He and a fellow colleague, Richard Alpert, decided to forge ahead outside the traditional academic environment. They announced a bold initiative called the International Foundation for Internal Freedom, which was designed to set up research and psychedelic training centres across America. Leary understood the risks early on. He commented he knew that his program to teach intelligent use of drugs was as threatening in 1963 as the notion of sex education had been a generation before.

Capture and Release

To mainstream America and its politicians, it was clear Leary had to be silenced. He was arrested at the Mexican border by custom officials in 1965 for possession of about one ounce of marijuana found in his car. The marijuana had a street value of about five dollars. In 1968 President Richard Nixon declared an all out war on drug-use and Leary was retried on his prior marijuana charges. He was given the highest bail ever set at that time, convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison. It was no coincidence this occurred just after Leary had announced his candidacy for Governor of California in 1969, with his opponent being none other than the former movie star, Ronald Reagan. Leary escaped arrest and fled to Europe. He was recaptured in Europe in 1973, but released once Nixon lost office. Leary never again became the dominating influence he had been in the 1960s, although he remained a cult hero. To his credit, he could move with the times and foresaw, before many, the great impact of the electronic age. He insightfully stated that the personal computer would become the LSD of the 1990s. His final years were a far cry from prison life. He lived in opulence in Beverly Hills, had rock star Rod Stewart as a neighbour and was busy giving 10 to 15 radio, television and press interviews a week.

Dope-Fiend or Leader?


After that short biography, it is necessary to return to the basic question: “Who was Timothy Leary?” Clearly, the youth of his generation saw him as a key figure in change — a cornerstone of the counter revolution. To them, Leary tested the American government and gave it a failing grade. Their parents saw him as a defiler and corrupter of youth — a self-deceived, dope fiend who harmed many innocent lives. To the politicians Leary was a man hooked on “high,” and

he had to be stopped at all costs. Leary insightfully, and not without an impish grin, summed it up by stating, “everybody gets the Timothy Leary they deserve.”

Legend of a Revolutionary


When examining Leary’s life, one must look past the “sloppy” scientist, as well as the media concocted “Evangelist of LSD.” Once that is done, it is easier to accept him as a revolutionary genuinely looking to reform for better or worse, well ahead of his time, and persecuted like any other prophet.

Many of Timothy Leary’s works, such as *The Politics of Ecstasy*, *High Priest*, and *Neuropolitique* are back in print. Although dubbed by much of the mass media as a crazed-out druggie, readers can judge for themselves.

Leary is now dead, his ashes released into the cold expanse of outer space. On his death bed, his last words according to his step-son Zachary were, “Why not?” Indeed, this was a fitting epitaph to a man, whether right or wrong, who challenged the establishment and its power all his life, and lived by the motto, “Think for yourself, question authority.” 

Readings

1. Leary T: *High Priest*. Ronin Publishing, Berkely, California, 1995.
2. Leary T: *Timothy Leary: Outside Looking In*. Park Street Press, Rochester, Vermont, 1999.
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5. Leary T: *Changing My Mind, Among Others*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1982.



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