

Introduction by Ralph Metzner

to new German language edition of *Birth of a Psychedelic Culture*

When Ram Dass and I were having the conversations which resulted in the writing of this book, we agreed that we wanted to say “Birth of a Psychedelic Culture”, not “The Birth of (the) Psychedelic Culture”. Psychedelic cultures, like other human, animal, plant or fungal cultures are manifold and diverse, with multiple branches like nervous systems. We chose the mammalian metaphor of “birth”, but we could equally well have said, “the branches of...” or “the networks of” or “the growth of” or, more abstractly, “the varieties of”. In our book, which originated as a series of conversations recorded in 2004-2006, we describe the origin or birth of one strand of psychedelic culture in the US East Coast in the early 1960s environment of academic social science and psychotherapy. At the time of these conversations, we were both in our elder years, looking back at events in our personal history forty years before – tumultuous events that had roiled Western culture.

At that time, we were all three professional academic research psychologists, affiliated with Harvard University. We unexpectedly found ourselves entering a totally new field of expanded awareness, with naïve ignorance about these consciousness expanding substances and their prior expressions in other cultures. I sometimes have to remind audiences that while the letters *LSD* have acquired an almost supernatural aura of beliefs, ideals, conceptions and misconceptions over the past half century, in those halcyon days of the early 1960s, the letters meant nothing and had no associations. We innocently thought of ourselves as knowledge seekers, as explorers of previously unknown reaches of the human mind.

Furthermore, simultaneously with our branch of psychedelic culture, another entirely different culture, also involving the ingestion of LSD and other psychedelics, was born or manifested in the US West Coast “Acid Tests”, led by Ken Kesey and his cohorts, who operated with different values, different ethics and aesthetics, as we describe in Part V of the present book. Still other officially approved research projects and marginally legal or illegal cultures involving psychedelic drugs were being initiated around the same time in England, Switzerland, France, Israel, South Africa, Australia and elsewhere.

In my book *Die Erweiterung des Bewusstseins (2008)*, I wrote about the transformations of collective consciousness that occurred during the early 1960s, associated to an unknown extent by the consumption of psychedelics by hundreds of thousands of individuals. The 1960s saw revolutions of collective consciousness, the transcending of limiting conventions, the radical affirmation of humane, life-affirming values. The flowerings of a counterculture could be recognized in the following movements, all of which

exploded during the early to middle 1960s: the anti-war movement, countering the American war machine in Vietnam; the civil rights movement, countering racism in schools and housing; the ecology movement, countering environmental pollution; the women's liberation movement countering sexist prejudices; greater freedom of sexual expression, facilitated by the contraceptive pill, transcending conventional norms of marriage and family; and, most spectacularly, an upsurge of creative innovation in music, the arts, fashion and literature, extending far beyond the aesthetic forms and norms of previous generations. The multiple branches and strands of psychedelic culture were interwoven in subtle and mysterious ways with all these movements.

Sometime around 2003 or 2004, Ram Dass and I had a conversation in which we agreed that he and I should write a book about our experiences in the Harvard psychedelic research projects of the early 1960s, our mutual collaborations with the Timothy Leary and other early psychedelic researchers, as well as our subsequent participation in community living at Millbrook, New York and the explosive social movements of the mid to late sixties, in which we were both unexpected participants and astonished observers. Forty years on, each of us had developed our own particular life path, found a place in society, and written books in our respective fields, but we had not directly addressed the tumultuous events of the early sixties in which we had participated. Tim Leary, who died in 1996, had written two memoirs, *High Priest* (1968) and *Flashbacks* (1983), telling of these events in his own unique and flamboyant style, but Ram Dass and I agreed that we needed and wanted to tell the stories of our collaborative adventures as we ourselves experienced and remembered them.

The practicalities of writing a book together were daunting. How were we going to do this? As synchronicity would have it, Ram Dass at this time was living with a small group of friends and collaborators in a community in San Mateo, south of San Francisco; I was living with my wife and children in Sonoma, but driving often to San Francisco to teach at the California Institute of Integral Studies. We decided the best way to proceed would be to tape record our conversations, transcribe the conversations and use those transcriptions as the basis for our writing. Over a period of a couple of weeks, we met three times for about three hours each and recorded eight to nine hours of conversation. Ram Dass had two devoted assistants who graciously transcribed these conversations, providing us with written text to work with.

There was however an even more critical issue we knew we had to address. Both Ram Dass and I were aware that there were conflict issues between us that had never been resolved. Though our interactions, when we met at public events were always cordial, we skirted around discussions of these disagreements left over from the 1960s Millbrook story. Essentially, it involved the story of how Leary and I had asked Dick Alpert to leave the

community and not return, because we both felt he had become a divisive presence and was attracting other divisive individuals. This split in the core trio occurred in the Fall of 1965 and is described in Part IV of this book. I think RD's and my residual unease about this episode in our history, led to our asking a neutral third person, familiar to both of us, to act as interlocutor in our conversations. So it came about that the psychiatrist and mutual friend Gary Bravo agreed to mediate our conversation and he also then played the major role in organizing the text chronologically and providing the time-line paragraphs associated with each part.

During our conversations we did not proceed with a set sequence of events in mind. I remember that I might just say something like – “do you remember this situation, when this person did or said this...” and then we'd go off on reminiscences. RD and I both smoked copious amount of cannabis to facilitate the flow of stories, but we asked Gary Bravo not to smoke, and to keep some kind of chronological sequence of major events and situations in mind, asking us to comment on particular situations or individuals. Gary Bravo also spoke at length with me separately, and also with Ram Dass separately, including going to Maui at one point, to follow-up on various aspects of our respective stories. Several different already published stories of our experiences by Ram Dass and myself, were then also incorporated into the text.

And here was another one of those synchronicities that marked this project. After Ram Dass and I, along with Gary Bravo, had wrestled the text into what we thought was an acceptable form, I started to send it around to a number of publishers and agents I knew, only to find a disappointing series of rejections, based on reasons like “we don't do conversations”, “the 1960s is old news.” I was at that time conducting one of my alchemical divination workshops at the Synergia Ranch, in Santa Fe, New Mexico and was in a despondent mood because of the difficulties I had experienced finding a publisher for our book. The office and staff of Synergetic Press also reside at the Synergia Ranch. They had never before published books on psychedelic drugs, but their areas of interest include ethnography – they had published books by ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes and by anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna. So I was ecstatic when, in May 2006, we received word from Deborah Snyder that Synergetic Press was interested in publishing the book. This was the perfect match. Ram Dass, myself and Gary Bravo signed contracts as co-authors, and it took another four years to prepare the book for publication in 2010.

There were further remarkable and unexpected synchronicities. I had come to know Deborah Snyder and John Allen because I rented space from them at the Synergia Ranch for my workshops. John Allen was the visionary genius behind the Biosphere II project, had been a key ally and supporter of Tim Leary's space migration speculations. Although I had known about

Leary's interest in space migration ideas during the 1970s and 1980s, he and I had very little contact during those years, and I myself have never shared Leary's enthusiasm for space migration. I've always been more interested in projects that aim to preserve and protect the ecosystems of planet Earth. In John Allen's Biosphere II project, he and his colleagues had built, on Earth, in Arizona, a functional sustainable biosphere model to study the feasibility of living on other planets, in which a crew of six individuals actually lived for two years. I felt a strong affinity with John Allen's projects and ideas and was astonished to learn that Tim Leary and John Allen had connected during the 1970s and were enthusiastic supporters of each other's ideas and projects.

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This book can be thought of on the analogy of a piece of chamber music, performed by a trio of musicians, telling the stories of experiences we shared, not according to a pre-set score, but improvising with our diverse but interconnected strands of memory. Another musical analogy for the original events of the 1960s that we were relating would be that it was a comic opera, with many and diverse characters, composing and improvising as we went along, dealing with the unexpected events and provocative situations in which we found ourselves.

In Part I, a first movement in *allegro* mode, we relate stories from the years 1960 to 1962, when Leary, Alpert and I, along with several other graduate and some undergraduate students, as well as friends and partners, were participating in exploratory research projects with psilocybin under Harvard University auspices, causing considerable discomfort among university administrators. Both Ram Dass and I describe in Part I our first psychedelic experience, which was for each of us, as it has been for thousands or millions, an initiation into a completely new worldview, a new *Weltanschauung*. From the viewpoint of university administrators and academic psychologists who believed in a social science approach of detached observation, we had left scientific objectivity behind by actually taking the drug ourselves, instead of just giving it to others and observing the "drug effect". To the contrary, those of us in the project realized that for these substances, which fundamentally change the way you perceive the world, you could not reach scientific objectivity *unless* you also participated in the subjective experience. This is the central epistemological dilemma at the core of all research and understanding of mind-expanding substances. The result of this paradigm collision was that Harvard University stopped allowing our project to continue under its auspices after about two years and we continued independently of the University, founding what we called the League for Spiritual Discovery.

Part II consists of two *intermezzos* dealing with the retreat and training programs our group ran in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, in the summers of 1962 and 1963. In the first one our core group of researchers, participants

explorers and friends, ran small group sessions for and with each other, freed for the moment from the high pressure academic and research environment. What later became *The Psychedelic Experience – A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, was first drafted at this time. We had followed a suggestion that Aldous Huxley made to Leary, that instead of thinking of the psychedelics as medical drugs we should think of them as means to facilitate a spiritual ego-death and rebirth experience, given a supportive and appropriate set and setting. Then we could use the Buddhist *Tibetan Book of the Dead* which provides preparatory guidance for actual death and rebirth as a kind of analogical guide for the ego-death and ego-rebirth experience that could occur with psychedelics. Our sessions that summer of 1962 taught us valuable lessons as we developed practices and rituals for conducting psychedelic sessions with terminology that was spiritual growth oriented, without being doctrinally committed to any Eastern or Western religion.

After returning to the US we were inspired and committed to continue exploring the values and possibilities of psychedelic substances, while completing our academic teaching and graduate studies at Harvard. The second *intermezzo* describes how, by the summer of 1963, we felt we had learned enough about how to conduct spiritual growth oriented psychedelic sessions, to offer a training program for others in Zihuatanejo. All the psychedelic drugs were at this time still perfectly legal, so there was nothing underground about our work. On the contrary because of the exploding publicity surrounding the Harvard studies, the response to our invitations was overwhelming. The sensationalist publicity from the Harvard studies also attracted the attention of the Mexican authorities, who shut down the program amidst chaotic circumstances.

Part III, dealing with the first year of the Millbrook community (1963-1964) had musical narrative tempos that varied from celebratory and stately *andante* to joyous *allegro* and almost manic *presto*. This was the time when the use of psychedelic drugs increased phenomenally in society worldwide, simultaneously with the prohibition of such use. Those of us living in the community attempted to communicate our observations about psychedelics to the larger mainstream culture, placing them in a historical and cross-cultural context, while also harmonizing our own living and working community. After Leary and Alpert left Harvard, none of us had “jobs”. Raising funds by giving talks, workshops and writings became prime agenda. The assassination of John F. Kennedy in the Fall of 1963 sent a shock wave of tragedy and political reflection.

We started to search for models of other ways to expand consciousness development, besides Tibetan Buddhism, as for example in the work of G.I. Gurdjieff. Particularly touching for me was discovering the writings of Hermann Hesse. Leary and I wrote an article for the *Psychedelic Review* in which we speculated on the disguised references to experiences

with hallucinogens in Hesse's novels *Steppenwolf*, *Die Morgenlandfahrt* and *Das Glasperlenspiel*. The theme of *Steppenwolf* resonated with the theme of confronting one's dark or shadow side and the "magic theatre" in that novel seemed like a description of a psychedelic group experience. From my reading of Hesse as well as Indian and Tibetan Buddhist writings, I was very attracted to the idea of going to India, and when the possibility arose to accompany a group on my own spiritual and literal journey to the East, I left. My wife Susan sent me a letters about what was happening in Millbrook, as did Tim Leary who got married to the Swedish model Nena. These letters portray what seems in retrospect a celebratory high point of the whole Millbrook spiritual community experience. He and Nena left on their honeymoon to India, where I met up with them briefly – but soon thereafter they split up and all three of us returned to Millbrook, chastened and dejected.

Part IV – Spring 1965-Fall 1966, was definitely in a slow, *largo* mode. In Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*, the group of pilgrims on the spiritual journey come to a place ominously named *Morbio Inferiore*, where they mysteriously start to argue and mistrust each other. In Part IV we relate how Millbrook, that place of magic, trust and transcendence had become a place of arguments and aesthetic ugliness. I split up with my girl friend, Tim and his new wife Nena split up. Dick Alpert was enthralled with what Leary called a "band of rowdy omnisequals". Tim and I met with Richard in a coffee shop in Poughkeepsie, and asked him not to return to Millbrook. He proceeded to go to London and France where he gave talks and eventually went on a long trip to India, where he met his guru who initiated his transformation into Baba Ram Dass, America's beloved home-grown guru. He and Leary both eventually reconciled and appeared on lecture stages and in TV films together, telling jokes and stories in a friendly manner. Ram Dass and I also reconciled and the telling of the stories in this jointly authored book is the outcome of this process of rebuilding our friendship. I was glad we were able to take advantage of the more liberal and compassionate attitudes towards homosexuality in the new millennium to address the fearful and paranoid ideas about it that were still current in the 1960s.

Part V is a kind of musical *coda*, in which Ram Dass and I, now as friends and colleagues meeting again with the perspective of 30 years later, offer some concluding reflections. We discuss Leary's provocative attitudes and statements, his seeming recklessness with regard to his own safety, the issues of the new prohibition, the cultural revolution of the sixties and the meaning of the spiritual search. We agreed that for himself Ram Dass's spiritual path focused on serving others, akin to the traditional Indian *bhakti* yoga approach, whereas Leary and I were more on the explorer, knowledge-seeking yogic path, with our shared interest in science and cosmology. On the other hand I have always shared Ram Dass interest and attraction to Hindu and Buddhist philosophies of life, which Leary did not, whereas I'm less

drawn to Leary's speculative interests in space migration and new technologies.

I appreciate the opportunity that my friends at the Nachtschatten Verlag, Roger Liggerstorfer, Chris Heidrich and their other colleagues have created to offer this seminal and unusual double autobiography to German-speaking audiences.