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A Conversation With Dr. Timothy Leary

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Interviewer's Note: When Catherine Rogers (local New Orleans Alternative Newspaper Publisher) asked if I would be interested in speaking at the Discovery 92 Expo, I immediately asked who else would be there. She said, "Timothy Leary." I said, "Sure I'll give a talk, and I want to interview him." If you're old enough, think back to the 60's for a moment. Somewhere in your thoughts the name Timothy Leary should spring forward, full of meaning, complete with lights, sounds and feelings. If not, check your pulse.

Dr. Timothy Leary. Harvard psychologist and researcher. Expert on altering consciousness with mind-expanding drugs, lights, sounds and more. Cultural renegade/cultural icon. One of the most colorful characters of the past half century.

*As background for the interview that follows, in addition to talking with a mutual friend (Robert Dilts, who did a series of lectures across the country with Leary several years ago), I started with his autobiography, *Flashbacks* (Tarcher, 1990) and a collection of his writings, *Changing My Mind, Among Others* (Prentice-Hall, 1982). Both highly recommended. So where has he been the last few years? Debating Watergate conspirator G. Gordon Liddy, and others, in various forums across the country. Lecturing. Developing computer software for the mind. Writing articles. Staying much busier than other 72 year old men I know.*

Personally, I was thrilled to spend time with one of the great psychologists of our time. I had much more to ask him than our time together would allow, but we connected three times and had some good talks. Leary is unpretentious in the extreme. He always smiles for the camera. He smokes a lot and drinks large cups of coffee. He moves quickly, conserving both time and energy. And he tells you what he believes—uncensored, unabashed and unashamed. It would be difficult not to like him immediately. Has he mellowed in his challenges to authority? Possibly. Does it show? Not much. One final observation to all those who asked me: "Didn't all those drugs he took totally fry his brain?" NO.

Leary began his talk at Discovery 92 with the following plea for understanding and compassion: "I've just discovered a new way of expanding consciousness, of altering consciousness, and having visionary trance experiences and getting lost in the greater things in life. It's called senility." Personally, I hope someday to achieve this state with as much wit, grace and clearheadedness. We began our conversation by talking about his recent work in computer software and electronic approaches to altering the mind.

How do you see all your work in cybernetics, and with computers, and all the coming things, as an extension of what you were trying to do 30 years ago?

It's a classic and natural extension—and updating. This discipline of understanding altered states of consciousness and dealing with ways of accessing them, is as old as human history. Any time there is a breakthrough in technology, or in psychology, we learn a little bit more.

In the 1960's at Harvard, we were basically using the methods which had been used for thousands of years. Candlelight; amplified sound, which was very powerful. What was different was that we were trying to *communicate* it. We were trying to develop ways of communicating this experience which, of course, cannot be expressed in words, or in left-brained orderly icons. We made some progress in the mid-60's with what we called psychedelic light shows. We would have Jello in lights, we would have overlays, and we would have three or four film projectors all on top of each other. Sometimes we would have a show where we would have eight or ten slide projectors, all timed like a symphonic orchestra.... So if you had sixteen fiddles, we'd have sixteen light projectors, and so forth, and with sound too. The beating of the heart. There is a tremendous tradition of altered state, or trance, music. Voodoo music, the music of South America and Africa.

The drums.

Yeah, the drums, the drums, the drums banging. The mesh of the liturgy of the Catholic Church, the droning noise of the Gregorian Chant. So there's a long long history of audio-visual ways of communicating ... well, there are two ethics here. You can use the drums, the bells and the light to create the trance state. And after it's all over, you can use it to experience, to communicate it, to share it with other people.

But we had to give this up because—well it was simply too labor intensive.... now with the tremendous advances, with electronics and multi-media so-called virtual reality—electronic reality—devices, the *powerful* sounds.... this new kind of music called "techno-rock." And the idea there is they get a thousand young people together and they just jam their eyeballs and their eardrums with sound and light, and put them in a trance situation—but without a spiritual life that's just missing there, for many people.

But we're trying to use that same method, now, to let you choose what kind of messages you want to put in there, so that you're programming your brain using this multi-media overload. It's being done all the time by commercial tv, of course. So for seven hours a day people submit their eyeballs; and therefore their brain's being programmed by Michelob Beer. "*The night belongs to Michelob.*" Or George Bush, you know ... So we're talking about methods using inexpensive computers where people can do it to themselves.

Yeah. What do you think of all the new brain-mind machines like the synchro-energizers and all those things with the goggles and the headphones? Do you think there's a real future in that, or do you think that in the same way that, for some people drugs become limiting because they can't control them enough, that they're going to be just one more step on the path to get somewhere else.

Well anything that's prefabricated ... like if you buy a record or a disc, that's the way it is if you like it or not. You can turn it up, you can turn it down, you can turn it off, or you can turn it on. If you buy a synchro-energizer, or one of the other brain machines, many of them are programmed now to give you a choice of meditated, or animated [or whatever]. The key, always, is building in self-options so that the person's not just passively lying there like a vegetable being energized. Also, that you can put in your own programs, like "stop smoking" or "enjoy your brain" or whatever you want to communicate.

So yes, basically I'm very much in favor of the bio-brain machines with, again, the caveat—*the warning*—that you've got to put your own design on it, or else you'll become a vegetable with a machine.

Sure, sure. You know it's interesting because I was a therapist for a long time and I was always looking for ways to alter people's states in very particular ways. But just altering the state was never enough. You had then to utilize the altered state to help the person make some kind of a change and there is always the limitation of getting inside that other person's brain. I studied Milton Erickson for a long time and all the NLP people. We have Stan Grof, we've got Ericksonian Hypnosis, and NLP and those kinds of things, and certainly the work we talked about that Robert Dilts does with re-imprinting, that largely he credits to your thinking; that helped him. Is the kind of re-imprinting that we're doing the kind of re-imprinting that you were intending to do with the drugs back then, or do you think that we've gone off on the wrong, or a different, path?

I think it's inevitable. There's a very powerful, strong, movement. They talk "trans-personal" which is a brand name for the inner exploration and getting to understand how to operate your mind and your brain....

I'm a very strong fan of NLP. It's a little more scientific, both in its language and its methods. But everybody gets the guru they deserve, unfortunately, and everybody gets the language and the methods they deserve. Everyone that you mentioned, Grof, Erickson, Metzner, Krippner, the so-called New Age or trans-personal psychologists, they're all basically humanistic. They believe it's in you, and it's your job to find it, and it's their job to *help* you find it. They're very democratic. There's no doctor-patient authority thing there. They're open-minded and good natured, so I endorse all of that, very much.

It relates very much to what you talked about a lot in your auto-biography. One of the theories that you were trying to explain to people when you were starting to use LSD especially, and psilocybin before that, was that the "set and the setting" were very important. That you really have to be going in with the right frame of mind and have a particular intention, and expect it to be good; and you have to put yourself in a safe place or you're going to get into trouble. Do you think that that's mainly what's going on that makes these therapies effective as well—that the set and the setting is there to begin with?

The set means not only your expectations, but also your psychological strength at the time—what you want from your life. If you're just looking for a good time there's nothing wrong with that, but ...

That's what you're going to get.

... that's what you're going to get. You'll get a good time, but it will also lead you, eat you, open you up. Of course the key to all this is communication. If you're lying there with a brain machine, having your brain titillated and inundated with all these strobe lights, or if you take LSD by yourself, it's just you and your brain.

So, it's communication; doing it with other people is the key. Philosophy is a *team sport*. Anything you think about you've got to put into action. That's what McLuhan said. He said: "I never know what I'm thinking until I hear myself say it to somebody else and hear their reaction to it." You see once they react to it, then it's not an idea in my head, but it's a living thing that's out there.

In NLP we like to say that the meaning of a communication is the response that it gets back.

There you go, yeah.

In that sense, I was thinking about set and setting last night. I was talking with somebody who is a big fan of yours, and said that during the 60's when she was in college she started taking a lot of drugs, but unfortunately *you* were on a path of evolution, and *she* got stuck—and woke up when she was 35 years old and realized that she'd just been taking the drugs and a lot of her life hadn't evolved in the way that she wanted to.

Yeah.

And she decided at that point that she was an alcoholic and a drug addict and quit until she could learn how to do it right. Is it the set and the setting that we're talking about there? What would you say to those folks.

I think, plain common sense. If you take LSD once or twice, and you have illuminations, and it teaches you a lot, and you start studying and you hang out with people, yeah. But if you take LSD, and then you smoke a little marijuana to calm down, and then you take a hit of cocaine to get you going, and then you're drinking—what does this have to do with anything? It's just plain stupidity.... you're obviously not dedicating your life to anything, a life of change and growth ...

Which is the dedication you had, I suppose.

Yeah. Your set; you're basically operating out of lazy self-indulgence. Now I have nothing against lazy self-indulgence, at least three hours a week on weekends, or more, you can lie back and be lazy and self-indulgent. But common sense. Common sense.

Let me frame this question a little more broadly. I read Ronald Siegel's book *Intoxication* (Dutton, 1989) which I found very interesting. He described drug experiences as just a natural part of all evolution, and even in the wild, animals ...

Well, I wouldn't call it "drug" ... if a bear is running through a grain yard, eating and drinking up all those fermented grains, he's not going to the liquor store. He's just eating what is his *brain* food.

Right, that's what his contention was too. Siegel said it's natural.

Siegel explained you have to feed your brain. Your brain has certain receptor sights just like your lungs need oxygen. But, unfortunately, or maybe fortunately—but in any case *realistically*—there's food around everywhere, there's plants everywhere around so you can eat, and there's air around in the atmosphere. But the location of brain foods varies a lot as you move around geographically. They grow here and they don't grow there. The fact is, it's so wonderful that the fermenting of certain vegetable products produce altered states. It's very interesting.

But it's the intoxication effect; it's a normal, a natural effect.

Yeah, again intoxication. The word "toxic" means poison, you understand. I have nothing against intoxication. You know, any word that the moralists want to use. You say, "Yeah I want to fuck my mind up." I do, yeah, because it's the only way to put chaos in, and loosen it up.

That's great. You know this is an argument that I give to lots of people who are very much into the anti-drug, or drug-abuse movement, and they get sort of lost in their medical model ...

Now wait, we're *all* against drug *abuse*.

I agree. Certainly we are.

I'm *all* in favor of the intelligent *use* of drugs, which means not at all being abusive.

Well, Siegel's argument at the end of the book was, we just need to have better drugs and know them better, and be able to use them wisely—along with everything else. I would think that you would be in agreement with that.

Yeah.

What do you think about—from the other end of it—when people do have problems quitting drugs, or when they get addicted, or have problems? Do you think that there are particular ways that are best to help those people, versus others?

Well you're generalizing, of course, again.

Very much so, obviously.

And, everyone has their own reasons for screwing up.

I believe that too.

Of course it's almost classic—to become addicted to anything is an obvious sign of lowered self-esteem. You have no pride. You have no sense that you're running your own ship. People who have that sense of helplessness, or laziness, or they're just unlucky enough not to be around people that encourage them ...

Yeah, they're going to get in trouble.

Yeah. People with high self-esteem—you can fall off the wagon, or smoke too much marijuana and be silly. But once you see it, and then you begin to realize it, then you become your *own* police. You have to become your own DEA. You've got to be your own FBI, your own psychopharmacologist. With the help of your friends. That's one of the things; you have your wife or your husband or good friend to say, "Hey baby, two beers is it for you from now on." Or, "Hey, come on, if you're going to go to work on Monday, don't smoke marijuana for breakfast." But again, it goes back to *common sense* ...

And individual needs ...

... and self-esteem, and understanding no matter how fucked up you are, you can improve, as long as you ... you've got to have someone that will be with you, because *denial* is so key here. You can't kid yourself: "[in a gravelly voice] Well, I smoked marijuana too much last night, or I had too many drinks ... or whatever." You've got to have somebody mirror it back [holds his hand up to my face like a mirror]. But again, everything we're saying here is common sense.... you can't buy that. All you can do is remind people of it.

I think that's true. This may sound like a strange question. If you were a young psychologist starting off today, into research or therapy or whatever, where do you think you'd start? Do you think you'd do things differently?

Well I think the concept of psychology is really so ambiguous now ... it depends upon the *college* and what you'd hear from the psychology department. In one psychology department, there are old guys that are still running rats like Skinner did; but in another they're all Jungians and all they want is for you to dream and all that. You can't generalize about psychologists. Basically, most psychologists are pretty intelligent, easy going people. They have some interest, and they're more open minded than, probably, law students, but I'm not sure. But again, you can't generalize. Basically, I think the concept of psychology is a 19th century profession that's over now. It implied that, "You're an expert, and you're a doctor now, and there are patients, and you have to treat them.

Yeah. Well that sort of gets around to another question. You've obviously bumped into those establishment problems over the course of your career many times. Let's say somebody was getting into areas like NLP or hypnosis or something like that and there were people who were saying, "No, you're controlling people's brains and we're going to stop you. We're going to cut off your funding, we're going to ruin your reputation, or whatever ..."

Who's going to cut off your funding? The government's going to cut off your funding? ... The idea of government funding is the number 1 heroin addiction of western civilization. Why *anyone* who believes in humanity expects to have the government—of all people the *government*—like the Soviet Union is going to give government funds? Naturally, the government, by definition, is going to *not* be interested in supporting things that are going to allow individuals to think more clearly and to become more independent. Governments are trying to make everybody dependent.

Sort of like the hens asking the foxes to protect them, huh?

Yeah. I mean if you want to go in there and talk to the Stalinists that run Washington D.C. to give you some lights, all right. But be aware of the fact that you don't ask the Vatican to be supportive of birth control.

You know it's interesting thinking about Ram Dass [Leary's colleague at Harvard who we discussed prior to the start of this interview]. He's been here several times. I find him to be a fascinating guy.

He is truly a fascinating person.

He tells the story about having given LSD, at an ashram, to one of his gurus and it almost had no effect ...

Well that's an old trick. He made that up.

Did he really?

That's the oldest trick—prisoners do that. You give LSD to prisoners, they'd tongue it and sell it in the yard. If you go to impress a very naive young psychologist who thinks he's got this pill, and it cures everybody ...

Don't take it until ...

... *common sense*. Number one, you're not going to do it. If you're going to do it, you're going to have your people try it out and find out what's going on here. [It's] the last thing in the world you're going to do—it might be *cyanide*! How does *he* know what it is?

True.

Listen, the rule of common sense is don't *ever* take any pill from anybody if you don't know exactly what it is. See? So the guru is simply doing what is common sense—doing what the prisoners do. There's one thing about all of this field of altered states and frontier thinking. Any time that someone comes up with a story, that kind of boggles you, and you say "My God, that's miraculous," nine times out of ten they're fucking you over.

You think so?

Like being abducted [by aliens] so many times. "[Mocking, animated voice] No kidding?" "Yeah, of course something happened to me and you know the, uh, chair jumped from here to over their!" "No kidding, Wow!" Be very aware.

Pretty impressive, yeah.

Yeah. Of course, that guru was something. By the way I'm not putting him down. He was a wonderful guy. One of the best gurus. But most of the gurus in India—it's a power, master, domination thing. Most of these foolish Westerners go over there and ... nothing wrong with doing it for a while to learn how it's done and all that, but ...

Well, I think the Yaqui Indians perfected that pretty well too, didn't they?

Oh yeah. Don Juan and Castaneda—it's all just trickery. They admit it right out in front, see. I can never fault Castaneda because he was right out in front. Don Juan's just kidding you around. And I would say Neem Karoli Baba, Richard Alpert/Ram Dass' guru is a wonderful, *wonderful* man and a very intelligent man, laughing his head off ... some famous doctor from New York ... comes in his jeep and he'd bring him forward and say, "Gee, can I have your Jeep (heh, heh, heh)?" Just fooling around, you know? You need to say: "Yeah you can have my Jeep, but can I have your refrigerator?"

So you almost have to have a bit of the "bargainer" in you—still have to remember that you're dealing with *people*.

Well it's *common sense*.

Is there any wonderful question I should have asked you but didn't? [Leary laughs] I'm sure there's a whole bunch of them. I see that sly smile come out.

Socrates said the aim is not to give any answers, but to stimulate questions, and to reflect back the questions, because everything is individual and it's changing and the basic thing—my bumper sticker—is: "Think for yourself, and question authority." Think for yourself, and question authority. And learn the new ways of communicating, because your mind is formatted and totally locked into the way you communicate. Today you've got to be able to talk, you've got to be able to write, you've got to be able to do the electronic stuff—be able to put your ideas on screen. So think for yourself, and do it electronically.

Thanks Tim.