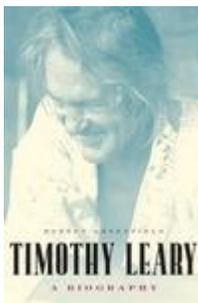


Turned On, Tuned In, Dropped Out (Too Bad)

A review of



Timothy Leary: A Biography

by Robert Greenfield

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Reviewed by

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It may be a cliché, but that's the story: Timothy Leary, budding Harvard tyro, gets introduced to psilocybin, then LSD, sees God (or something like that), gets fired, becomes a high priest of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, is labeled “the most dangerous man in America” by Richard Nixon (who should have known what he was talking about), spends time in prison, and takes up an interest in space travel. When he dies, his ashes are shot into space.

And it's a story told well, in great detail, with plenty of documentation, by Robert Greenfield, author of *S.T.P.: A Journey Through America with the Rolling Stones*, *The Spiritual Supermarket: An Account of Gurus Gone Public in America*, and other works of nonfiction and fiction. Predictably, perhaps, Greenfield spends most of his time on Leary's post-Harvard career. He provides extensive documentation of Leary's activities at Millbrook, cut short by police raids (one led by G. Gordon Liddy, later to take part in the Watergate

break-in, and even later to join Leary on the lecture circuit), and of Leary's adventure in California, which included a run for governor (his campaign slogan, "Come Together, Join the Party," inspired a Beatles song). Convicted of marijuana possession, Leary eventually escaped from prison with the help of the Weather Underground and made his way to Algeria, where he sought shelter from the Black-Panther-in-exile Eldridge Cleaver, and then to Switzerland. En route to Afghanistan, which had no extradition treaty with the United States, Leary neglected to check out the legal status of his commercial airliner, on which he was arrested and promptly returned to prison, this time at the notorious Folsom State Prison (Charles Manson was in the next cell over). After his release from prison, in 1976, Leary attempted a career as a Hollywood celebrity, made a living on the college lecture circuit, and promoted a plan for space migration and life extension, but mostly lapsed into alcohol and drug abuse. After he died of prostate cancer, in 1996, some of his ashes (along with those of Gene Roddenberry, creator of *Star Trek*) were sent into space on a private rocket. Not for nothing did Leary hope that a Hollywood movie would be made of his life. Failing that, Greenfield tells this story in full detail and with considerable drama.

For psychologists, however, it is Leary's life and career up through the Harvard episode that probably excite any interest other than the prurient. Here again, Greenfield has done an excellent job putting the pieces together, and there is much that will surprise the reader—not least that after two years at the College of Holy Cross, Leary spent a year (1940–1941) as a cadet at West Point (he was also offered admission to Annapolis), where he was charged with an infraction of rules against public intoxication (after the Army–Notre Dame football game) and endured “the silence” for refusing to inform on his fellow cadets. Rather than resigning, he demanded a formal court-martial, where he was acquitted. Still, he dropped out of West Point and continued his college education at the University of Alabama, where he enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and began to study psychology—and from which he was expelled after spending an unauthorized overnight in a women's dormitory. Having lost his draft deferment in the midst of World War II, he enlisted in the army, where he trained as a psychometrician at Ohio State University but saw no overseas duty. Reinstated at Alabama, he completed his undergraduate degree by correspondence. After taking a master's degree from Washington State University with a thesis (supervised by Lee Cronbach) on the relationship between hearing loss and IQ (based on data he had collected during his military service), in the fall of 1947 Leary enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of California–Berkeley.

Greenfield provides much detail on the vicissitudes of Leary's personal life during the Berkeley years—his marriages, the births of his children, where they lived, who their friends were, the affairs. Unfortunately, Greenfield doesn't spend much time on the academic side of Leary's life. Although Leary remained in the San Francisco Bay Area for another decade, founding the psychology department at Oakland's Kaiser Hospital and establishing a private practice in consulting psychology, we learn very little about Leary's relationship with Berkeley and its Institute for Personality Assessment and Research. Likewise, there is little

appreciation for the importance of Leary's early work. Leary's 1950 dissertation, *The Social Dimensions of Personality*, supervised by Hugh Coffey and Jean MacFarlane, together with other work done at Berkeley's Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (Freedman, Leary, Ossorio, & Coffey, 1951; LaForge, Leary, Naboisek, Coffey, & Freedman, 1954), formed the basis of his classic 1957 monograph, *The Interpersonal Diagnosis of Personality* (Leary, 1957; see also Leary & Harvey, 1956). On the basis of the clinical theories of Harry Stack Sullivan (Sullivan, 1953), Leary proposed to assess personality in terms of interpersonal behavior. In this way, his early work can be seen as a pioneering empirical attempt to integrate personality and social psychology. Based on data collected during group therapy sessions (e.g., Leary & Coffey, 1954), Leary's "Interpersonal Circle" offered a sophisticated quantitative analysis of personality structure, but there is little discussion of what Leary's "Circle" actually was all about, or what its ramifications were.

During this same time, Leary and Frank Barron, working mostly at Kaiser, developed a method for the objective assessment of personality change during psychotherapy (Barron & Leary, 1955; Leary & Gill, 1959; Leary & Harvey, 1956). This must have been a response to the critical analysis of psychotherapy outcome published by Hans Eysenck in 1952 (Eysenck, 1952), and indeed their results were congruent with Eysenck's. But there is little analysis of the broader context of the study. There is mention of Leary's loss of a research grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) but no indication of what, exactly, the grant was for. Leary's personal life was in turmoil, and that must have taken its toll on his research, but it's not completely clear why he abruptly moved with his children to Europe, thinking that his career in psychology was over and intending to live a new life as an expatriate—especially because the next event in Leary's academic life was his recruitment to Harvard.

With respect to the years in Cambridge, Greenfield has a firm grasp on both ends of the story: Leary's personal life, which remained in turmoil, and his academic life, which began with a new lease and ended so quickly and dramatically. Harvard wanted to reinvigorate its clinical program, and it wanted to bring some young tyros on board to do it. David McClelland, who had been brought in to direct the Center for Personality Research, the institutional successor to Henry Murray's Psychological Clinic, installed Leary in a research position that also entailed some teaching responsibilities. At first, Leary's contribution to the program was to broaden the definition of fieldwork. With Richard Alpert, who held a regular faculty position at Harvard, Leary directed students away from mainstream clinics and hospital rooms, oriented as they were then toward Freudian psychoanalysis, and into skid-row hotels, community centers, orphanages, and jails (Leary, 1993). Even here, though, there were early signs of trouble: Greenfield quotes a letter from McClelland warning Leary to "stop using slogans and waving banners" and pay closer attention to scientific rules of evidence.

In the spring of 1959, Leary cautioned a graduate student who was experimenting with mescaline against "chemical meddling." That summer, however, inspired by Barron's

stories of the effects of “magic mushrooms” on creativity, Leary tried some for himself. Only then did he read Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1956), relating his experiences with mescaline. Within days, Leary, Alpert, and Barron had formed the Harvard Psychedelic Project and began collaborating with Huxley, who was then a visiting professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Leary & Clark, 1963; Leary, Litwin, & Metzner, 1963). They wrote to Sandoz Laboratories, which had extracted psilocybin, the active ingredient in the magic mushrooms, and received a “big bottle” by return mail (boxes of psilocybin pills would soon follow). Unfortunately, their plans for controlled experiments on creativity and behavior change quickly fell victim to what can only be called recreational usage. Within two months of the start of school that year, the stringent procedures for subject selection, the standardized doses, the control groups—all were scrapped. Instead, Leary was arranging psilocybin trips for Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac (when Sandoz stopped supplying psilocybin, Leary switched to LSD).

To illustrate what was happening, Greenfield provides a detailed account of the Concord Prison Project (Leary, 1965, 1969), the goals of which appeared good on paper but which even the prison warden recognized lacked a proper control group and proved to have an improper baseline comparison (Doblin, 1998). Greenfield also provides a vivid account of the Good Friday Experiment—its double-blind, placebo-controlled design was compromised as soon as the psilocybin began to take effect in the experimental group (Doblin, 1991).

Greenfield also details Harvard's response on the basis of interviews with many of the principals as well as the documentary record contained in McClelland's archived correspondence and papers. Initially, the faculty simply wanted to ensure that the experimental protocols adhered to strict scientific standards (it was common practice for the experimenters as well as the subjects to be stoned). But in the hothouse atmosphere of the Harvard Psychedelic Project, there were also concerns that graduate students were being pressured by their superiors (that is, by Leary and especially by Alpert, who actually held faculty rank) into taking drugs. The issue came to a head in the spring of 1962, when McClelland, Brendan Maher, Herbert Kelman, and others convened a meeting to review the project and its place in the graduate training program. Although defending Leary and Alpert against outsiders on grounds of academic freedom, Harvard also put their supply of psilocybin under the control of the university health service. The project was effectively shut down, except that Leary now had access to LSD—which had recently been synthesized by Sandoz and was not yet a controlled substance—as well as to a large number of willing subjects at the Harvard Divinity School (hence the Good Friday Experiment). It was a version of “whack-a-mole” in which Leary and Alpert were shut down in one respect, only to reappear in another.

When Leary and Alpert made clear that they intended to continue their work, independent of institutional constraints, Harvard withdrew any remaining semblance of support. Leary leased his own facilities, hired his own biochemist, and became the sole subject of his “research.” In the spring of 1963, after an undergraduate complained that

Leary had not read the draft of his senior thesis and Leary balked at returning to campus from a trip to Hollywood, Harvard fired him. But, as Greenfield makes clear, Leary was fired for going AWOL, not for taking or administering drugs. In 1966, the federal government put LSD on the controlled-substances list.

Here, as elsewhere, Greenfield's documentation is extensive, and his writing is vibrant. This is a very good biography, as pleasurable and rewarding to read as it is long. Even if it doesn't provide all the detail that professional psychologists might want about Leary's academic career, it traces the course of Leary's life and career(s) in a way that will engage any general-interest reader. Greenfield's research has been prodigious, including comparisons of Leary's various memoirs against each other, those of other principals, and the documentary record. In one respect, however, Greenfield's efforts have not been served well by his publisher. Although the book is extensively indexed, there is no comprehensive reference list. More important, the extensive endnotes are not numbered and are linked to the text only by the first words of the relevant sentence. Apparently the publisher thought that numbered endnotes would be off-putting to the general reader. Although this may be true, it seems that this is a small price to pay to make the work more valuable as scholarship.

Reading Greenfield's book, I am struck by two ironies. The first is that Leary's first work was his best work. Not for nothing has it been cited more than 500 times in the ensuing years, mostly favorably. Leary's interpersonal circumplex was adapted by Lorna Smith Benjamin in her "Structural Analysis of Social Behavior" (Benjamin, 1974, 1993), as well as by Leonard Horowitz (Horowitz, 1979; Horowitz et al., 2006), Jerry Wiggins (Wiggins, 1980, 1982; Wiggins, Phillips, & Trapnell, 1989), and other personality theorists (for overviews, see Leary, 1996; Strack, 1996; Wiggins, 1996), and it also influenced circumplex models of the structure of affect (Russell, 1980; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). If Leary had continued this work, using group therapy and other real-world settings as a vehicle for data collection, he would now be recognized as a major figure in personality and social psychology instead of as the inspiration for a Moody Blues song.

Second, as I was preparing this review, a group of investigators centered on Johns Hopkins University published a toned-down conceptual replication of the Good Friday Experiment, complete with adequate placebo controls and with quantitative measurements, that effectively confirms the claim that psilocybin can induce profound mystical experiences (Griffiths, 2006). So Leary may actually have been on to something. One wonders what would have happened if Leary had only retained allegiance to the canons of the scientific method. Harvard was willing to defend him on grounds of academic freedom, and all McClelland and the others wanted were genuine experiments yielding meaningful results. Perhaps, in the 40-plus years since the Harvard Psychedelic Project was disbanded, we would have learned something interesting about the biochemical bases of mystical experience. Instead, we have to start all over again, reinventing the wheel, under the closest imaginable institutional and government scrutiny.

Here's a problem for counterfactual history: Greenfield reports that, while Leary and Joanna Harcourt-Smith (his common-law wife at the time) were living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, under the aegis of the federal witness protection program, using the pseudonyms of James and Nora Joyce (long story there—you've just got to read the book), he applied for a faculty position at the University of New Mexico. One has to wonder what would have become of Timothy Leary if he had just played by the rules. But then, as Greenfield suggests, Timothy Leary wouldn't have been Timothy Leary.

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