

October 1, 2000, Sunday The New York Times Magazine Late Edition – Final

Enlightenment Thinking

By Natalie Angier

It was the ultimate acid flashback, courtesy of that modern route to the promised land -- the Internet.

Not long ago, my brother-in-law was showing my mother the power of a Web search. He typed in the name of my father, Keith Angier, who has been dead for 23 years. Much to the family's astonishment, the search turned up a missive that none of us knew existed but that could now be found online in the Timothy Leary archives. My father wrote the letter to Leary in Millbrook, N.Y., in 1963, when I was 5 and we were living in the Bronx.

"Ever since reading an article on the psilocybus mushroom by Gordon Wasson in a 1957 Life magazine article," he wrote, "I've been interested in this and other hallucinogens." My father then described his quest for the "ultimate truth" through the use of both "plain mystical contemplation" and peyote, which at that point could be ordered through the mail from Native American religious groups. He had concluded that "in this era of ubiquitous distractions," hallucinogens "may be the only way for most of us."

Unfortunately, it was his experience that "peyote is not only hard to take and keep down, but contains several useless and baneful alkaloids along with the couple of good ones." Hence his plea to Leary, whom he and my mother had seen on "The David Susskind Show" discussing LSD: "I am interested in your organization because Internal Freedom is the most important freedom in the world, and your explorations in this area are among the most valuable today," my father summarized. "Please send membership information to the address below."

Or, as my younger brother wryly paraphrased it, "Dear Timothy Leary: Please send drugs."

My father was a chronically unhappy and difficult man. He dropped out of high school but was a voracious autodidact. He did so well on the Army's I.Q. test that the service wanted to send him to officers' training school -- until it found out he had no diploma. He was discharged honorably with a halfhearted diagnosis of "borderline schizophrenia." Returning to civilian life, he took the first job he was offered, as a low-level machinist at Otis Elevator, a post he kept -- and hated -- until he died at 51.

As he wrote Leary, my father was always in search of "ultimate truth," and a place where he could rest, and trust, and feel a moment of thoughtful calm. He couldn't help being spiritual, really; he got it young in such strong doses. My grandmother, who reared him and his two sisters alone, was a devout Christian Science practitioner. As a young man, my father renounced Christian Science in favor of Communism, but then renounced that when he grew disgusted with Stalin. He returned to the Christian church, first as an Episcopalian, then as a Catholic; I still have the wooden crucifix that he carved in 1957, showing a Jesus so strong in body it is as though he were holding himself up on the cross.

Finally, he traded Christianity for Buddhism. I grew up knowing Buddha's eightfold way, and that life is pain, and that this pain is caused by desire -- including, as I saw, the desire for enlightenment.

With or without the help of Leary's organization, my father obtained LSD, and my parents and their friends sometimes took it. I knew that too, and I knew that I wasn't supposed to talk about it with anybody. I knew as well my father's harsh philosophy regarding drugs. He disliked drugs that he considered stupefying, among them heroin, speed and cocaine. Moreover, he had nothing but scorn for those who took psychedelic drugs recreationally. As he saw it, casual users were at best wasting their time, not to mention cheapening the meaning of compounds that have been used ritualistically by cultures throughout history; at worst, they were risking their sanity and possibly their lives. Hallucinogens, he said, should be taken in the presence of an enlightened guide or priest if possible, with the goal of expanding consciousness and defying the illusion of self. You want an easy thrill, try a bottle of muscatel.

It sounds quaint, and self-exculpatory, if not self-deluding: another dopehead, trying to justify his high. Well, maybe -- or maybe not. We live in an era of such extreme antidrug propaganda that merely to mention the possibility that not all drugs are bad all the time risks, I suppose, attracting the attention of the drug czar Barry McCaffrey's troops. Hallucinogens didn't make my father happy, of course, any more than did religion, or leftism, or the intricate ink drawings he drew, or the interminable Tibetan ritual music he listened to. But they all helped make him who he was. If drugs didn't expand his consciousness, they certainly stamped it. I suspect that, by taming the brutality of self, they offered him fleeting glimpses of freedom. And my father had the ultimate safeguard against addiction: he was so easily disappointed.