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## Tripping the light fantasmic

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**Sixty years after it first began running amok, the world's psychedelic problem child is having a new coming of age, writes Rak Razam.**

“Last Friday, April 16th, 1943, I was forced to stop my work in the laboratory in the middle of the afternoon and to go home, as I was seized by a peculiar restlessness associated with a sensation of mild dizziness. On arriving home, I lay down and sank into a kind of drunkenness which was not unpleasant, and which was characterised by extreme activity of imagination.

“As I lay in a dazed condition with my eyes closed, I experienced daylight as specially bright. There surged up from me an uninterrupted stream of fantastic images of extraordinary plasticity and vividness and accompanied by an intense, kaleidoscopic-like play of colours. This condition gradually passed off after about three hours.”

He didn't know it at the time, but Dr. Albert Hoffman, the Swiss chemist known as the “father of LSD” or d-lysergic acid diethylamide, had just come back from the world's first acid trip, as recounted in his autobiography, ‘My Problem Child’. It was an extraordinary moment, a brush with madness and the divine that would leave any ordinary person fearing for their mind. Sixty three years later, Hoffman's unique chemical is still trying to shake off its reputation and the whole world has been drawn into his long, strange trip.

“LSD: Problem Child and Wonder Drug”, an international symposium held in Basel, Switzerland from Jan 13 – 15, is the latest chapter to unfold in the lurid history of LSD. As well as discussing the current medical and cultural state of the controversial chemical, the symposium also celebrated Dr. Hofmann's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

This venerable Swiss chemist is the retired director of research for the Department of Natural Products of Sandoz Ltd., the pharmaceutical firm in Basel, Switzerland that merged with Novartis in the 1990s to become one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. The Novartis tower dominates the skyline of Basel, framed by two giant chimneys that bellow out gases from the pharmaceutical factory. Yet the people of this city seem oblivious to the billowing white clouds permanently overshadowing their lives, in much the same way that most of the world is unaware of Basel's prize citizen and his creation – LSD, and how those three little letters changed the world.

Yet all that is changing, and at the prestigious Basel Convention Centre over two thousand members of the global psychedelic movement have gathered for an intimate moment with their hundred year old spiritual 'father'.

Dreadlocked hippie survivors of a bygone age wander through the grand lobby of the hotel, mingling with doctors and their wives. Hundreds of therapists, academics, writers, artists, holy men, drug fans and yes - respectable people of all ages - are gathered here to talk about the importance of LSD and the benefits it can bring to a materialist society in need of a spiritual reconnection. Day-glo blotter art, the vibrant pictures that have adorned sheets of acid for over thirty years are displayed on the walls. The smell of pot wafts generously through the air, despite the no-smoking signs.

Dr.Hofmann walks slowly on crutches into the cavernous 'San Francisco' seminar room to thunderous applause from the thousands of 'psychonauts' that his chemical has spawned. He carries an air of quiet dignity about him as he takes to the stage, guided by his colleagues and overseen by a Swiss guard. He looks incredibly ancient, like Mr Burns from the Simpsons come to life, sans the malice.

But while the body is frail, his mind is preternaturally sharp. There's an energy and vitality in his eyes, a hint of the mystic, the alchemist that turned on the world. "A chemist who is not a mystic is not a real chemist," he says with a smile, alluding to the idea that science must look within, as much as without for answers. He has, he admits, taken LSD in his old age in very minute, sub-psychedelic doses. It was originally intended as a circulatory agent, and maybe that, along with the heightened sense of oneness with nature it can bring have kept him young. Or maybe it's just the Swiss air.

The symposium is awash with psychedelic folklore, as new Heads meet old Heads and trade stories about their underground mythology. They are like neurons bonding in a collective brain, transmitting the idea of themselves to the world. It's a surreal environment, peppered with the BBC and other world media, mellow Californians, grey-haired septagenarians and, no doubt, undercover law officials. Yet the very idea of such a large-scale conference on responsible LSD use shows just how far this underground culture has come.

The story begins in 1943, when a young Dr.Hofmann was doing research into the properties of ergot in search of derivatives for migraine relief. He had a 'strange presentiment' to look again at a lysergic compound he had first tested in 1938. Despite the meticulous cleanliness of the Swiss laboratory, a minute dose of LSD-25 was accidentally absorbed into Dr. Hofmann's body and the world's first acid trip began.

For the next ten years LSD was quietly and legally spread to research labs across the world as a generation of chemists, doctors and researchers discovered the miraculous properties of the drug in aiding psychoanalysis, helping cure alcoholism and personality disorders, in easing pain and anxiety and in giving terminally ill patients a sense of the divine.

The term 'psychedelic' or 'of the mind' was coined by Dr.Humphrey Osmond in 1954 to better describe LSD and similar chemicals like mescaline, with this little ditty: "To fathom hell or soar angelic, try a pinch of psychedelic."

One of the key LSD practitioners back then was Dr. Al Hubbard, who stormed the gates of perception with the novelist Aldous Huxley. Dr. Hubbard was a notorious acid cowboy nicknamed 'Captain Trips', who was said to have the largest supply of LSD in the world after Sandoz itself. Like many who became 'acid evangelists', Hubbard had a grandiose idea that "If he could give the psychedelic experience to the major executives of the Fortune 500 companies, he would change the whole of society," recounts Dr. Abram Hoffer.

Writers and scientists alike were also attracted to LSD as a creativity drug. In 2004, just after he died, London's the Daily Mail reported that Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA, was inspired by his use of LSD at Cambridge in the 1950s.

And he wasn't alone – LSD therapists treated housewives, businessmen, movie stars, politicians and the intelligentsia of the world, who in turn turned on their friends - which is where it all started to spiral out of control. Freak-outs, bad trips and widespread inappropriate use led to a media frenzy which concentrated on the spectacle unfolding in the acid culture of the time.

The objectivity science had cultivated since the Renaissance also melted in the face of the direct experience model favoured by shamen and alchemists. Scientists like Timothy Leary had amazing success with clinical trials of LSD at Harvard, but became embroiled in controversy when they self-administered the drug in unconventional ways. Leary became one of the key figures preaching the benefits of psychedelic culture, going on to form his own church – the League of Spiritual Discovery - and turning on the world with slogans like 'Turn On, Tune In and Drop Out' that inspired the burgeoning Hippie movement.

As historian Martin A. Lee, author of 'Acid Dreams' explains, even the CIA conducted secretive 'MK-Ultra' tests with LSD on the pretext that if they didn't explore its potential for war – as a way to incapacitate the enemy and brainwash prisoners – then the Russians would. After dosing their own agents without their knowledge and conducting mind games that resulted in the deaths of American citizens, the CIA finally gave up on the drug when public attention on its use was exposed by the U.S. Senate.

Writers like Ken Kesey, who Tom Wolfe chronicled in the 'Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test', started distributing LSD with the Merry Pranksters and toured America in their day-glo bus, 'Further'. The Beatles got high and ushered in a wave of psychedelic music that swept the world. And a generation of kids rejected the rote values of their parents, opposed the war in Vietnam and unconstrained materialism, and dropped out to get back to nature and seek out the divine.

LSD became inexplicably entwined in the experimentation and revolution that swept the world, as the potential for mystic states left the monasteries and hit the streets. The tide was turning. Something was blowing in the wind.

By the late 1960s an estimated 40,000 people worldwide had been legally treated with LSD as a psychotherapy and consciousness-raising drug. Sandoz let the patent lapse on what it considered an embarrassment, despite twenty years of successful clinical

treatment. By the 1970s, according to Scientific American, over seven million Americans had used LSD. When the dust settled the communes were abandoned and the Pentagon failed to be levitated, but the world had changed.

Lee claims that "LSD directly and indirectly helped tune a generation of baby boomers back into themselves and their environment. The personal development, New Age and Ecology movements all blossomed as the lessons of the 60s were integrated and the cultural direction shifted," he says.

Ironically, while many cultures recognise the deep need to transcend the body and connect with the soul, it was chemistry - the seat of materialist learning - that produced the first man-made drug with spirit inducing properties. And the person who made all that possible is Dr. Hofmann.

He is an enigma – a respected scientist who sat on the board of directors of the Nobel Prize Committee for many years, and a deeply spiritual man who understands that science describes an outer set of events, and that the meaning of those events lies within.

"LSD came to me - I didn't look for it. LSD wanted to be found, it wanted to tell me something," he hints, smiling at the spellbound crowd in the auditorium. "If I had worked 100% safely and taken all the proper precautions, then we would not be here today. So sometimes it pays not to be perfect!" he laughs, radiating good humour.

The anecdote is very apt. The unplanned birth of his problem child caused waves that shook the world during LSD's heyday in the 1960s and that are still rippling through the fabric of society today. Dr Alexander Shulgin, an ex-chemist for the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), a component of the US Department of Justice, says that "LSD altered our knowledge of the human brain, leading to the awareness of dopamine and serotonin's crucial roles as neurotransmitters." Without it, legal drugs like Prozac and Viagra wouldn't be around to liven up your headspace or your bedspace, nor would the current age of neurochemistry be so developed.

Yet for many of the attendees at the LSD symposium, one gets the feeling that the chemical has become a sacrament at the heart of a post-modern/ archaic-revival religion. They say they are united by an ego-dissolving state of mind that has been shared by tribal cultures ingesting plant sacraments like that LSD is derived from for tens of thousands of years. The Greeks had their soul-enriching 'soma' at Eleusis, the shamans of the Amazon have their ayahuasca, the Mayans have their magic mushrooms and the Native American Indians have their peyote, to name just a few. But until the psychedelic resurgence of the 1960s, the West had not only ignored this aspect of its own psyche, it had actively tried to exterminate it in the cultures which valued it.

Despite being banned in 1966, a psychedelic underground has kept the unique experience of LSD inebriation alive across the world. And like all people persecuted for their religion, the psychedelic community still struggles to practice its beliefs. After decades of stigmatisation they are only now coming up from the underground to rebrand themselves to a new generation that has only heard of its sacraments as drugs and its practitioners as criminals. All because they share an altered state of mind.

But in an age of mass communication and startling advances in science and technology, the idea of altered states of consciousness is almost de rigeur, albeit invisible. Television, surveillance culture, cyberspace and legal lifestyle drugs, as well as a cornucopia of black market alternatives, are all a part of our reality. Culturally, the shock of the new is gone.

Which begs the question - does the world still need LSD? Dr.Hofmann thinks so.

“I think in human history it has never been as necessary as it is today,” he says up there on the podium, bathed in the light of a thousand cameras. “But it has never been legally sanctioned before. It is one of the modern sacred drugs but we don’t have a sacred room for it. It is one of the gifts that the plants give us, like food, vitamins and medicine. It is a tool to turn us into what it is in us to be. It should be integrated in a reasonable way by society to prevent its misuse.”

A significant number of current LSD sympathisers are actually medical experts who believe that when psychedelics are used with responsible intent and with the proper set and setting, they can be a powerful learning and healing tool. And after escaping the lab over sixty years ago, LSD is now cautiously returning to the medical fold as part of a renewed interest in the use of psychedelics as therapeutical aids.

Dr.Rick Doblin of the Florida-based Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), shares Dr.Hofmann’s hope that one day there can be legal dissemination of LSD by medical practitioners in state-controlled meditative centres. Along with Psilocybin, the active chemical in hallucinogenic mushrooms, and MDMA, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is considering a MAPs sponsored proposal by Harvard doctors to renew medical trials of LSD to provide relief for debilitating ‘cluster headaches’ and migraines, and to ease anxiety and pain for the terminally ill. The alchemical process is reaching a critical mass. Things are coming full circle.

To further promote LSD’s fair and responsible use for scientific research, Dr. Hofmann and dozens of other leading authorities at the symposium signed a ‘Declaration of Consciousness’ which will be delivered to the U.N. in Brussels and policy makers in Washington.

On the last day of the symposium Alex Grey, the renowned psychedelic artist, presented a picture to Dr. Hofmann for his birthday. It shows Albert circa 1943 as a earnest young chemist holding up the LSD molecule, but the figure is exploding with colour and chakra energies, cosmic ecologies interconnecting with him and out into a hallucinogenic ocean. It will probably find its way onto blotter sheets, double or triple dipped by underground alchemists in celebration of this tuning point in the global psychedelic movement.

But beyond all the hype and enthusiasm, what became apparent in Basel is that LSD has grown up. And perhaps the mistake the first time around was not with Hofmann’s ‘problem’ child at all, but with the parent culture and how it reacted to it.

Up on the stage at the Convention Centre, Dr. Hoffman waves to his cheering fans, glowing with a beatific innocence. The father has become the child and the child has

become the man.

And the long, strange trip has turned a new corner at last.

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