

TIMOTHY LEARY'S NEW TRIP: A REASON INTERVIEW

Jeff Rigenbach

One of the most striking about-faces in recent years has been the re-emergence of Timothy Leary. Released on parole from a California prison, the former guru of LSD and other "mind-expanding" drugs is now apologizing for the harm his former views may have caused and is championing two new causes: life extension and (nongovernmental) space colonization. Viewed with considerable suspicion by the left (on grounds that he allegedly testified against former cohorts to gain his freedom), Leary has turned up in the pages of William Buckley's National Review and is earning \$1600 per evening on the college lecture circuit, pushing "hope, not dope."

We at REASON were curious to learn more about Leary's changing views and his reflections on a decade of facing the might of the U.S. government. To interview Leary we selected frequent contributor Jeff Rigenbach, book reviewer and commentator for Los Angeles radio station KFWB. Rigenbach reports:

"When I received the interview assignment, I didn't expect to find myself interviewing a libertarian or even a person whose comments might be of interest to libertarians. In the 1960's Leary had argued for State control of drugs while fighting two marijuana convictions of his own—he was, then, no consistent advocate of freedom. In the 1970's, rumor had it he'd turned State's witness against friends in drug cases, had even made anti-drug propaganda films to facilitate his early release from prison—clearly, he was willing to limit others' freedom in order to expand his own.

"But as I prepared for the encounter with Leary, reading through his magazine interviews and articles of the past 10 years, and later, as I talked with him, I began stumbling over indications the 55-year-old "acid prophet" might be something of a libertarian after all: an unmistakably Thomas Szaszian approach to certain social issues (though Szasz has dismissed Leary [*Libertarian Review*, December 1974, p. 7] as "another megalomaniacal destroyer, or would-be destroyer, of mankind"); a view of the State which might as plausibly have been articulated by a student of Murray Rothbard or Albert Jay Nock; a deeply personal commitment to individual self-realization.

"In certain of his answers, though, as in certain of his published remarks, Leary confirmed my earlier suspicion of his inconsistency—though Leary would not call it inconsistency; he'd call it thinking on many levels. A way out of the difficulty might be to say that Leary is a man much more interested in creative, lateral thought than in developmental, vertical, "logical" thought. He speaks softly but with enormous energy and rapidity as if hoping vainly to overtake his mind, a part of which is always racing ahead, taking conceptual risks, trying out new metaphors, trying not so much for clarity as for insight, for sudden understanding, while his voice skips along behind, hanging the first words that come to hand on the outthrust spines of ideas strewn like tumbleweeds by a storm.

"A man with a storm in his head and blue lightning in his eyes. The sort of man some call a visionary and others call an irresponsible intellectual charlatan. I had come to see justice in

both views by the time we were ready to open the microphones and start the tape machine. The news angle on Leary was that he was out—out on parole in California after serving 32 months on a state conviction for possession of less than half an ounce of marijuana—out of the Federal pen on a personal bond while appealing his conviction and 30 year sentence on Federal charges of "smuggling" less than half an ounce of marijuana into Laredo, Texas. I asked Leary about his imprisonment, and about one of those areas of apparent inconsistency—the drug laws."

REASON: You told an interviewer 10 years ago you considered the Federal marijuana laws "clearly in violation of several amendments to the Constitution," including the Eighth, which forbids cruel and unusual punishment. Since 1966 the Federal marijuana laws haven't changed, but you've been punished for violating them. Do you feel cruelly and unusually punished, singled out for harsh treatment out of all reasonable proportion to your "crime"?

LEARY: I spent four years in 29 jails and prisons on four continents—all this for being in a car where someone else had, without my knowledge, less than half an ounce of marijuana. I wouldn't say my treatment was cruel, but I would say very unusual. The general strategy of almost every social group that I'm involved in is to try to keep me quiet or to keep my broadcasts muted. This happened in Algeria, where they said "Well, Professor, we'll give you a position at the University of Iran but please don't talk out." They said that at Harvard; they offered me

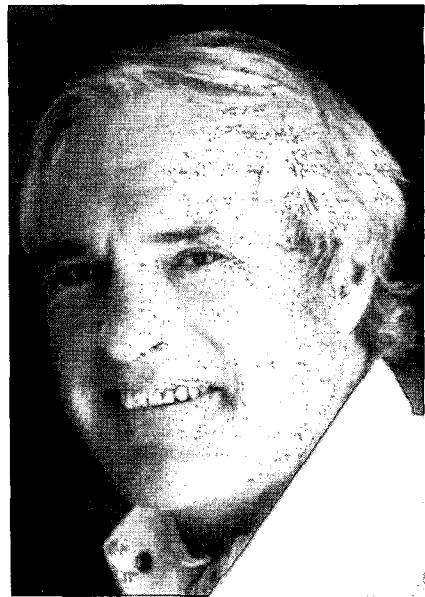


Photo by Rita Lauria

tenure three times if I would just kind of quiet down a bit. Throughout the prison experience I was kept in solitary confinement over half the time, and there was always the tendency to move me around to keep me from staying too long in one place where I would get to know too many people. I don't consider this cruel, I consider this an accurate tactic on the part of the people who are trying to silence me. And far from being bitter about it, I take this sort of opposition for granted. In football, naturally, the defense is going to red-dog and crash the line and try to block your passes. I saw what they were doing and adjusted to that defensive maneuver.

REASON: So you hold the view that what has happened to you at the hands of the legal system is purely and simply a response on the part of the authorities to your unpopular and controversial opinions?

LEARY: It's a predictable response and a correct one. Despite the separate and distinct images the public has of me, ranging to all extremes—political, philosophic, criminal and so forth—I'm basically a philosopher. That's my profession. I've got a union card—I'm not a self-appointed philosopher—called Ph.D. When Joanna [Leary's estranged wife] and I were kidnapped in Afghanistan by Federal authorities—and by that I mean that they illegally took our passports away and escorted us to a waiting airplane where there was a battalion of Afghani troops lined up at present-arms—when we got on the plane, the American police authority who was bringing us back to America handed us little green cards which allowed us one-way passage back to

the United States, and where it said "occupation" was typed in—and this is the U.S. Justice Department—Philosopher.

Now then, I've justified my credentials as a philosopher, and I'd like to say a word about the profession of philosophy. It's not well understood in a brawling, frontier country like America. In Europe, the role of the philosopher in society is recognized as being extremely important. In a couple of words, the philosopher's task is to get up in the morning like everybody else, shave, have breakfast, and go to work, trying to figure out what's happening to the human race, where we've come from and where we're going. The particular function of the philosopher is to come up with new ideas about the past and the future. And these ideas, if they're any good, have got to be controversial. I've said many times: if a young man grows up and wants to be a baseball player, if he's fairly good, he gets to the minor leagues, if he's really good, he gets to the major leagues, if he's fantastic, he gets into the Cooperstown Hall of Fame. If you're a philosopher and you're good, it's inevitable that you end up in prison, or close to prison, or in exile. I can ask any of your readers to review the scientists and philosophers throughout history who have really produced new ideas, who have expanded the perspectives of our species, and almost everyone of them not only spent a lot of time in prison, but did his or her best writing or thinking from the prison cell. So, far from being resentful, regretful, or angry about the opposition to my ideas, I take it as a fantastic endorsement and flattery of the possibility

that my ideas and my philosophic notions are creating ripples, vibrations, stirring things up, getting people to think in new ways. That's what I wanted.

REASON: You've been accused of buying your way out of trouble by turning your former friends in to the narcs. *Playboy* ran a full-length article [September 1975] consisting of little else but such accusations. *High Times* ran a brief item [Fall 1974] under the headline "Timothy Leary: Psychedelic Stool Pigeon." Is there any truth to these charges?

LEARY: No there's no truth to those accusations. You know, I find this rather amusing. People say, "Yeah, he's only done four years. If they let him out after only four years he must have cooperated with the government." But sure, we cooperate with the government, and I'd like to clarify that issue, too. Joanna and I are not criminals and we're not law enforcement people. We intend in the future to have nothing to do with either side of that polarity. We are law-abiding people. We intend to cooperate with the government of the United States, *definitely*—underline that. After many years of observing the political situation, and four years in prison, where you really see how the politics of a country goes because a prison is the best place to understand the general social climate, we've come to the conclusion that it's all gangs that control countries, states, blocs, and so forth. It's all like the Mafia. The best gang in the world, the most powerful and the most enlightened gangster group that's controlling territory, is the U.S. government. They give you more freedom,

more latitude and longitude, and we're very pleased and proud to say that we're going to deal with them. That doesn't mean we agree with them. It doesn't mean we follow all the ins and outs of policy. But basically, it's their turf. We're glad to be on their turf, and we'll pay them the respect any gang leader demands.

REASON: Suppose a gang leader came to you and said, "Unless you let us know for sure whether A, B, and C, who, we know, are past associates of yours, have been recently trafficking in LSD or psilocybin, we'll make more trouble for you." Would you be inclined to answer their questions truthfully?

LEARY: Exactly that situation came up in the weeks before my release from prison. A lot of government agencies came around and wanted to find out, well, what's this guy going to do when he gets out there? And of course they're always asking if you will cooperate. And they asked me exactly that question. I said absolutely not, that any place we go in American society, 90 percent of the people we meet are going to be smoking grass, sniffing cocaine, and so forth and absolutely not. On the other hand, if we see any great threat of violence and if crooks come after us and steal from us, yeah, we're going to cooperate with the law. But we're *not* going to concern ourselves with helping law enforcement that way.

By the way, I want to say that we have no interest in drugs and the politics of drugs. Right now, drugs are big business. There's a two billion, three billion dollar grass industry in this country. You know, it's all consumerism, and while we saw it happen and we're mildly interested that it's going on, we have no active interest in it whatsoever, nor do we have any interest in the politics of drugs.

REASON: You said a moment ago almost in passing that you thought a prison was the best place to study the political organization or political system of a country. Will you elaborate on that?

LEARY: The basis of all politics is control, control of territory, status, power; and the ultimate power is to kill or to imprison, so that the prison situation is the essence laboratory where you see how the government uses its power to restrict and control the people that it doesn't want free. Who do they put in prison? In Russia, there are many more political dissidents in prison than there are in this country. But here we have a lot of cultural dissidents . . . do you know what I'm

speaking of?

REASON: Of non-conformists, bohemians, radicals, victimless criminals? People who take drugs the authorities don't want them to take?

LEARY: That's what I had in mind.

REASON: That phrase, "people who take drugs the authorities don't want them to take," is adapted from the writings of Thomas Szasz, the radical psychiatrist, whose approach to social issues often seems similar to your own. Your argument in a recent issue of *National Review* [April 16, 1976], for example, that Patty Hearst, William Calley, Charles Manson, Daniel Berrigan and Huey Newton are scapegoats in a "ceremony of hunting sinners, publicly trying them, and assigning retribution" resembles the idea of "ritual persecution of drugs, addicts and pushers" which underlies Szasz's *Ceremonial Chemistry*. You yourself have called the criminalization of LSD "another war on heresy" [in the News-

REASON: Yet ten years ago you told *Playboy* that marijuana and LSD should be "put under some form of licensing where responsible, serious-minded people could purchase these chemicals" so that "manufacture could be supervised and the sales could be both regulated and taxed" and a "healthy and profitable situation would result for all involved." Have you changed your mind?

LEARY: No. Remember my answer to your question about libertarianism: that these concepts exist at many levels. Another way to say this is that the time dimension throws any public issue into a different perspective. At a short range you might take one position. In a 10-year range you might take another and over a 20-year period, you might . . . but you see that your opinion would depend upon what time frame you worked in. Now to go back to the question about authority and liberty. We believe that the current insectoid socialization which is going on in every country throughout the world—in China and in Russia most flamboyantly, but certainly in this country as well—is a necessary stage. It's alarming. The State is taking the place of the family. The nuclear family is being wiped out in some of these countries, and it's the omnipresent Central Committee of the Party that is becoming the new central force. We think this is necessary because centralized authoritarian countries are the only systems that can produce the scientific energy breakthroughs in their competitions with each other that are needed to further the evolutionary process of the human race.

I don't know if you're familiar with Thomas Pynchon's book, *Gravity's Rainbow*, which is not only the best book that has been written in the last 10 years but I think answers some of these political questions very clearly. He points out, for example, that World War I had no political meaning. I mean, why was Russia on one side and Germany on the other and the Archduke that got shot the catalyst? The real meaning politically of World War II was atomic energy versus radar versus submarines versus biochemistry. And World War III, which started the day after World War II ended—with Russia becoming our enemy, just like magnetic filings which suddenly take on new positions as the charges change—World War III is all about Sputnik, space travel, satellites, that sort of thing. I'm coming back to your question. We're very impatient with the low level of most of these discussions that go on in our magazines, newspapers, and even in books. If you

The best gang in the world, the most powerful and most enlightened gangster group that's controlling territory, is the U.S. government.

[letter of the Association of Humanistic Psychology, April, 1976]. Does your agreement with Szasz extend to his most unorthodox opinions about drugs—that there is no such thing as drug addiction and ought to be no such thing as drug laws?

LEARY: Yes. I've known Thomas Szasz for many years. As a matter of fact, I invited him to come to Harvard; that's the first time he ever came there when he was at Syracuse, to give a lecture. I've been an admirer and a supporter of his ideas for about 15 years. And I totally agree with the statements that you just relayed from him about the essentially inhumane nature of the drug laws.

REASON: Szasz identifies himself politically as a libertarian. Would you follow him there?

LEARY: Yes. I think concepts such as "control," "freedom," "liberty" exist at many levels, and at the political level, yes, I've very much a libertarian.

understand where the human race is going, then a lot of the problems like the drug laws you see as inevitable, minor, little dislocations over a process that is quite perfect and is definitely, precisely going somewhere that we can anticipate.

REASON: What would you say to an individual who said "My own life is the only aspect of the human race and where it's going that I care about and these 'inevitable little adjustments' are destroying my life during the only years I have to live it"?

LEARY: Well, number one, we would say "Don't put any limit on your life." Science now can assure us within five years of an extended lifespan leading to immortality. There's no reason why anyone should die, no reason why anyone should have to grasp onto his Buddhist, Hindu flashback, it's-my-life-here-now-and I'm-just-going-to-enjoy-it philosophy. Underlying that is the philosophy that we're going no place, that life is short and brutish and we're going to be dead soon, so why not enjoy it? This is the hedonic fallout of the 1960's, which was wonderful and certainly was an important step forward, but certainly is no solution. Come on, wake-up, you can be twice as smart, you can think three times as fast, you can live five times as long, and talk about enjoyment and pleasure, you haven't even started to learn how to use your nervous system and your body and this incredible energy system. And if you don't see energy waves coming, if you don't understand what evolution is all about and what it's going to do to the human race, not only are you in danger of getting wiped out suddenly, but number two you're losing the thrill and joy of being part of the most exciting thing that's ever going to happen. That is biological, neurological evolution.

REASON: You talk at times as though the individual can choose and should choose to be part of evolution. At other times you talk as though the individual is powerless in the face of evolution—or, perhaps in the face of evolution's opponents. You've accused Bob Dylan of spreading nihilism among the young—and more. In *National Review* you wrote, "Squeaky Fromme stands in a Sacramento courtroom and, for believing exactly what Dylan told her in the Sixties, . . . is led off to life imprisonment because she was unlucky enough to have owned a record player in her vulnerable adolescence." If "there's no reason anyone should have to grasp onto" the kind of negative thinking you believe Dylan represents, what sense does it make to say

Squeaky was led to life imprisonment by being unlucky enough to hear a Dylan record?

LEARY: The brainwashing agencies in our society are very pervasive and prevalent. Even radio and television, and I would now include the record industry, are part of this brainwashing process. Every kid, every child, when he or she is born, is a helpless infant in a kind of solitary confinement until mother comes in the dark and turns on the light and brings the bottle or brings the breast. If mother becomes the first person to bring food and warmth, then mother becomes the center of the first brain imprint. Then as the little baby gets older, he or she begins to understand something about territory—can't go here, who's bigger, who's taller, who's got bigger muscles, who can push you around. Another brainwashing occurs at this time, and models of power and models of emotional strategies are adopted or re-

If you understand where the human race is going, then a lot of problems like the drug laws you see as inevitable, minor little dislocations.

jected. The third stage is when the child gets to be the age where he can understand symbols and begins to imprint or adopt certain mental styles, certain sacred words and certain bad words. The fourth stage is when the child gets to puberty and his sexual brain kicks into operation. And then sexual models, seductive styles, the boy-girl calls and dances, the current tribal hairstyles, the teenage language . . . this is a fourth brain which is brainwashed.

Now in saying that Dylan was brainwashing people—unconsciously, he didn't know what he was doing—I was talking specifically about adolescents who at the time when they were ready to make their social, sexual identifications, and at a time historically when everyone was taking drugs, which again makes the nervous system much more vulnerable and susceptible to what the input is, a Dylan came along with these philosophic and emo-

tional ideas which, I think, are extremely negative. He was the fourth stage at a very crucial stage of a brainwashing process that every kid went through who came into puberty in the 1960's.

REASON: But wouldn't it have been necessary for all the rest of the surrounding cultural atmosphere to be just like Dylan or very similar to Dylan for Dylan's message to have "taken" on these adolescent children who were listening to him?

LEARY: Excellent; that's exactly the point. And I think I said in that *National Review* article that Dylan was laying down the 2,000 year-old Judeo-Christian trip that life is suffering, and it's a bad trip and, word for word, it's the same old trip, Bob, masochism, and whining and suffering and it's all over now baby blue.

REASON: But with such cultural optimists as Timothy Leary around was that the only input children were receiving at that time in history? Is it maybe a bit of an exaggeration to say Squeaky Fromme went to life imprisonment because she happened to have a record player at a tender age?

LEARY: Well, sure that's a metaphor. And anytime I use a metaphor, it's a risky operation. Metaphors are like forward passes. Anytime I say anything in terms of symbols I expect I'm wrong half the time, or wait long enough and I'll be right, or if you're right now you'll be wrong or left tomorrow—maybe left. So I won't defend that metaphor. But it got you thinking.

REASON: It certainly did.

LEARY: And I see ideas not as heavy, static concepts, but as electric charges and if someone can prove me wrong I'm the first one to be delighted because that means some signal I sent out got whacked back and jolted me. That's what I want you to do.

REASON: Let's talk briefly about ways of sending out signals. The print media were conspicuous for their absence, a moment ago, from your list of brainwashing agencies. Do you consider them incorruptible for some reason, or do you consider them merely out of date? No longer influential?

LEARY: We've come to the conclusion that almost everybody is basically illiterate. In the Middle Ages there was only one literate person in a thousand, a monk poring over manuscripts. Nowadays, sure, people can expose themselves to words, but it is a very passive, consumerite, almost narcotic process which has nothing to do with reading, with literacy. Literacy is getting into an active relationship with a book, like

the Gutenberg Bible. That wasn't something that you'd read while you were falling asleep. It was something you'd really expect to change your life. You'd expect to get into a dynamic exchange with the author, to have the book really open you up and move your head around. This is the way we define literacy. And that's why we say, perhaps provocatively, that maybe *less* than one person in a thousand today uses this ancient Medieval mode. While I was in prison I wrote seven books, five of which Joanna published because, again, we think the book publishing industry is part of the monolithic brainwashing bureaucracy and we're rather proud that we generated a signal and packaged the message and sent it out in our own kind of private network.

The most recent book is called *What Does WoMan Want?* The word "woman" is spelled capital "W" "o" capital "M" "a" "n". And we're suggesting this as a kind of semantic trip that might help us in understanding the crucial male/female relationship. If we began using fusion words that remind us that there doesn't have to be an alienated polarity here, but something that can be hooked up and connected like elements of the molecules to generate much more energy.

What Does WoMan Want? Of course you've got to read the book, if you can read, to get the detailed answer. But in one sentence, the answer is: WoMan wants everything. And he or she is through with artificial limits that can exist only in the mind and which can be gracefully and tenderly but effectively be opened up to new possibilities of living a long, long time, because she wants time, and being able to go off this planet to meet many other possibilities.

What Does WoMan Want? is called science—"faction," not "fiction." There are many reasons for that. One is that the life Joanna and I lead is science fiction. We're science fiction addicts: we read anything we can get hold of. And our lives over the last 10 years have been just as far out as any science fiction. Like that one episode—a battalion of Afghani soldiers *armed* to take us to an airplane. Why? For two joints of marijuana? And it's been happening day after day after day. "Science faction" means we define ourselves as "potential extraterrestrials," visiting this planet. We are not UFO people or anything like that. We are human beings who are about to evolve to what we call a post-human or post-threshold state. The book starts with our lives, and one aspect of *What Does WoMan*

Want? is about our own lives, but then it takes off and it takes the readers step by step into evolutionary terrain, so that suddenly they begin to think about leaving the planet and suddenly they begin thinking about extending their life spans so they can live a long time and suddenly they begin thinking about expanding their intelligence so that they can open up many new dimensions of their brains. And step by step in a series of books of which *What Does WoMan Want?* is the first, we're going to take those few people who can read out there on this step by step adventure in which suddenly if they want to they can become involved in our plans for space migration and evolution and extending broadcasting of evolutionary ideas.

REASON: What are some of these ideas? You said earlier we're passing through an evolutionary phase in which undesirable limitations on personal freedom are necessary. In preparation for what?

LEARY: I don't think they are undesirable. I think that the greatest limitations on our freedom are simply challenges to our strength. And if you're going to be a mutant and if

At the political level I'm very much a libertarian.

you're going to come up with new ideas, you've got to be challenged. It's in the interest in the protection of the species that they throw the book at us and that they try to stop us every way possible, because we're playing around with genetic forces. We're arguing here, we're discussing, the future of the human race, and mutants should be treated with tremendous suspicion. Because the mutation has got to prove its excellence and its quality and its strength and its courage and its beauty or it doesn't deserve to have more than a footnote in dinosaur archaeology books.

REASON: Will the mutants prove themselves?

LEARY: Well, we believe that the evolutionary process has been totally worked out. That the same process is going on in this planet after 2-1/2 billion years of the evolution of nervous systems which is going on in millions of other planets. That in perhaps a hundred other planets like ours, Joanna, Timothy, and REASON are sitting in front of microphones discussing what's the status of the evolutionary process on this planet. And that the minor little dislocations and

obstacles are simply tests of our courage and strength. And I don't think that's optimism; I think that's realism.

We often use the metaphor—and it's a tricky one—of the caterpillar and the butterfly. Inside every caterpillar is a butterfly, ready at the right time to come out. To be quite scientific about it, the genetic code for building butterfly wings and butterfly nervous systems, and butterfly eyes, and those beautiful butterfly colors is inside the body, and inside the nervous system, presumably, of the caterpillar, just waiting for the evolutionary process which is called metamorphosis—and it's a key process in nature, in genetics—metamorphosis, jumping from one stage to another. And suddenly the caterpillars begin changing and becoming butterflies.

And do you know the story about what the four caterpillars said when they turned on the radio program and they looked up and saw a butterfly flying by? "Well," one of them said, "you'll never get me up in one of those." And the conservative one said, "Well, it's illegal and dangerous." And the religious one said, "Well, if God had wanted caterpillars to fly, he would have given us wings," and so on.

So to come back to your question of specifically what vision we see: number one, we are going to leave this planet; we are definitely going to leave this planet. We've got the escape velocity. Any scientist will tell you that the technology and the economics are there. It's cheaper to live in a space colony than to buy a condominium in Palm Springs or Palm Beach. And the only thing that is holding us back from the necessary neurological escape velocity is simply geopolitics. We are centering our lives on leaving the planet, not as astronauts doing an acrobatic NASA trip, although we revere and respect the astronauts, they're very good people and really contribute a good deal to the evolution of our race, but as husbands and wives and families. It's 1491, 1492, and we've just discovered that we can do it. The physical risks in leaving the planet, living in space, are much less than the risks joyfully and gladly taken by the pilgrim fathers who came over here or those first fellows who crossed from east to the west 100 years ago. And that's very concrete, practical and specific. The great enemy is gravity. The way out is levity. And we are physically and biologically going to do everything we can to leave this planet and we're going to live forever... or die trying. □