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Ernest Kurtz, “Drugs and the Spiritual: Bill W. Takes LSD,” pp. 39-50 of Ernest Kurtz, *The Collected Ernie Kurtz*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Treatment and Recovery (New York: Authors Choice, 2008; orig. pub. 1999).

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*In early 1989, an editor of Lear’s Magazine asked if I would be interested in writing an article on Bill Wilson and LSD. This had been an interesting topic since the publication of Not-God. An A.A. Trustee had asked me to consider excluding that part of my dissertation from publication, but after consultation with my mentors, I decided to retain it as an essential part of the story. When the book was published, members and others who loved Alcoholics Anonymous did not object to the publication of this information but rather rejoiced that it revealed that Bill W. remained a flawed human being even in sobriety, just as did they.*

*Due to the demise of Lear’s, the article was never published and so appears in print here for the first time. I am happy for this opportunity, because this piece offers the opportunity to clarify my understanding of this somewhat ambiguous episode in the life of the longer-lived co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.*

## **Drugs and the Spiritual: Bill W. Takes LSD**

**by Ernest Kurtz**

A friend of mine, saved from alcoholism, during the last fatal phases of the disease, by a spontaneous theophany, which changed his life as completely as St. Paul’s was changed on the road to Damascus, has taken lysergic acid two or three times and affirms that his experience under the drug is identical with the spontaneous experience which changed his life—the only difference being that the

spontaneous experience did not last so long as the chemically induced one. There is, obviously, a field here for serious and reverent experimentation.

—Aldous Huxley to Father Thomas Merton, 10 January 1959

California, August 29, 1956. Four men – a philosopher, a psychiatrist, and two recovered drunks – sit solemnly, waiting. One of the alcoholics, who after his death would become the most famed holder of that dubious title, has just taken a dose of the chemical d-lysergic acid diethylamide, soon to be popularly known as “LSD.” The others are present to observe and to guide.

The expected, the desired, happens. Some twenty years earlier, in Towns Hospital in New York City, Bill W. had discovered the insight that became Alcoholics Anonymous in a “spiritual awakening”: an experience of white light and the sound of rushing wind and a feeling of deep peace. And now, on this day, in this very different setting, he finally recaptured that experience. His “doors of perception” cleared, colors glowed more intensely, the voice of Dr. Cohen reverberated with new resonance, all motion flowed with languorous beauty, and, above all, he comprehended “the essential All-Rightness of the universe . . . the reconciliation of opposites.”

A.A.'s own telling of this story in the book *Pass It On* describes Bill as “enthusiastic about his experience; he felt it helped him eliminate many barriers erected by the self, or ego, that stand in the way of one's direct experience of the cosmos and of God.” Bill continued his experiments with LSD into the early 1960s.

## **HOW COULD HE!?**

Addiction-obsessed as we tend to be in this era when drug use threatens our safety on the streets as well as the security of our homes, when we are bombarded by the feel-good theology of a thin new spirituality that claims all our malaises are rooted in “addiction,” alarm and shock seem appropriate responses to the news that William Griffith Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, experimented with LSD. We think of Alcoholics

Anonymous and the Twelve-Step programs derived from it as the main hope for dealing with the demand-side of drug use. Why would Wilson, who so well knew the dangers of mind-altering chemicals, attempt such an experiment? How **could** he?! For in addition to confusion, we feel betrayal – is this not evidence that Bill W. let his followers down, that A.A. is flawed in its source?

Addressing such concerns requires perspective: the 1950s were not the 1990s. We find a hint of the difference, and of a similarity, in Bill's own activities at the time. Far from keeping secret his experience with LSD, A.A.'s co-founder judiciously but eagerly spread the word, inviting not only his wife and his secretary but also trusted friends to join his experiments. Some, like his favorite Jesuit, Father Edward Dowling, did so. Others such as Dr. Jack Norris, non-alcoholic chairman of A.A.'s trustees, declined. Clearly, Bill experienced no sense of shame or guilt over his activities. He in fact regarded them as in service to the A.A. fellowship.

But how could he think this? And the question remains, **why** did he get involved in such an endeavor? We have no complete answer, but what we do know suggests that in a strange but real way, Bill was still seeking a cure for alcoholism – not the kind of “cure” that would allow drinking alcohol safely, but a way of helping more alcoholics get sober in Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, Wilson’s experimentation with LSD reflects one more facet of his persistent pursuit of “the spiritual.”

## **THE STORY OF LSD**

The use of hallucinogens as a cure for alcoholism goes back at least as far as the Native American peyote cults and was reported by anthropologists as early as 1907. The story of LSD begins with the synthesizing of the chemical, d-lysergic acid diethylamide. Although he first produced the substance in 1938, Dr. Albert Hoffman, a Swiss research chemist employed by Sandoz, discovered its properties only in 1943. His findings attracted interest, for scientists saw in LSD-25, as it was then called, “a drug which would make a normal person psychotic.” That implied a chemical basis for

insanity, and further suggested that if such “aberrant enzymatic action” could be reversed, an antidote had been found that would “cure schizophrenia.” A flurry of research began on “LSD-25 as an Aid in Psychotherapy.”

In 1952, two Saskatchewan researchers, Doctors Abram Hoffer and Humphrey Osmond, began investigations along this line. Hoffer and Osmond worked in a mental hospital, treating alcoholics as well as schizophrenics, and their interest centered on patients suffering both disorders. These were their toughest cases, for the schizophrenia seemed to impede the kind of insightful experience thought to be required if an alcoholic was to stop drinking.

Gerald Heard, who had introduced Wilson to Aldous Huxley in the mid-1940s, also supplied the link between Hoffer and Osmond and A.A.'s co-founder. According to Osmond's later recollection, Bill had been “extremely unthrilled” about their research: “He was very much against giving drugs to alcoholics.”

But the psychiatrists soon learned from their own experience as well as from observation that the main effect of the drug was to bring on an experience of illumination. They also discovered that that experience of illumination seemed to allow some of their patients who had previously resisted “the spiritual” to accept it and thus to “get” the A.A. program.

The results reported by Hoffer and Osmond fascinated Wilson. When LSD was given to alcoholics in mental hospitals, “of whom A.A. could touch and help only about five per cent, they had about 15 per cent recoveries.” One of the Canadian studies reported a recovery rate of 70 percent.

## **BILL AND SPIRITUALITY**

Here, then, is one clear reason why Bill Wilson experimented with LSD: he was seeking still further ways of helping alcoholics, of helping specifically those alcoholics who could not seem to attain sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous because, apparently, they could not “get the spiritual.”

But why this drive? The answer lies also in “the spiritual.” Bill yearned not only to recapture his own spiritual experience: he sought to slake a new craving, for his thirst for alcohol had become a thirst for alcoholics. In 1940, when Father Edward Dowling walked into Wilson's life at the very nadir of the co-founder's personal depression, the priest had assured Bill that we all thirst: to be human **is** to thirst. The question is at what we direct our thirst. In a very real sense, the story of Bill's sobriety details his turning of his thirst for alcohol into a thirst for alcoholics. That is why and how Alcoholics Anonymous first came into being. And grew. But Bill also learned, in those first twenty years, that the main obstacle to drunks “getting” A.A. was “the spiritual.”

Wilson understood. He knew of William James's observation that “The only cure for dipsomania is religiomania.” Bill himself had been a skeptic, as reflected in the A.A. “Big Book” chapter, “We Agnostics,” which details his own transition from conventional unbeliever to unconventional believer. Because that change had been precipitated by a “spiritual awakening,” A.A.'s co-founder guessed that a similar experience could help others like himself “melt the icy intellectual mountain in whose shadow [they] lived and shivered.”

## **AND TODAY?**

Today, such ideas seem strange. Or do they? We may not be so removed from Wilson's world as we would like to think. Both an implicit medical materialism and the hope that spirituality will help us transcend ourselves continue to shape how we think of addictions. Few would absolutely deny the presence in our own baggage of those two impulses that also lay behind Bill Wilson's LSD experimentation.

William James minted the term *medical materialism* to denote the insistence that there must be a measurable, physical cause in order for any malady to be *real*. On this topic, we all tend to be materialists: it is the dominant faith. And so arguments are waged and dollars spent and effort expended to locate the evil, the trouble,

the problems, the malady, in some physical form – in biochemistry, or “brain hormones,” or in the alcoholism gene.

That belief, and those efforts, were as strong in the 1950s. Then as now, reaction against the extremes of pop psychologies and fad psychiatries led the scientifically inclined to emphasize the reality of the physical behind apparently mental and emotional disorders. This materialism penetrated far. Episcopal Church Bishop Pardue, consulted by Wilson's friend and sometime mentor, the Reverend Sam Shoemaker, about a parishioner's complaint over Bill's involvement with LSD, declared himself “in the utmost sympathy with what [Bill] is doing.” The bishop, Shoemaker reported to Wilson, “is convinced that the biochemical factor is of the greatest importance. . . . half our problems are bio-chemical and do not go back to sin and cannot wholly be governed by prayer.”

But as the history of LSD bears out, belief in a physically material disease engenders faith in its physically material antidote. For every target there must be a “magic bullet.” And so if “brain hormones” were the problem, some other chemical would furnish the solution. “Medical materialism,” that is to say, shares the core assumption of addictive thinking: the belief that whenever there is something wrong with me, something outside me can “fix” it. No less than addiction, medical materialism locates divinity in drugs.

## **AN AMERICAN SPIRITUALITY?**

The second impulse shaping Bill Wilson's quest for spirituality was the American culture-religion, an Evangelical Protestantism watered-down by its subservience to the social science of its time. By the mid-1950's, sociology was replacing psychology as the lodestar of the American faith, but both apostasies gratified the demand for a spirituality that could be commanded.

Americans have never been good waiters. On the foundation laid by the Puritan “Half-Way Covenant,” despite pristine Calvinist bemoaning of “Arminianism,” the “calling down” of revivals early became standard practice. The mid-twentieth century version of this rationalization, for all its modern vocabulary, echoed the insights of

Charles Grandison Finney a century earlier: “New measures” (such as taking LSD) were justified because they attempted not to manipulate reality, but to remove the barriers that impeded spiritual reality from asserting itself.

Wilson set forth his thoughts on how LSD might serve spirituality in a 1958 letter to Sam Shoemaker. “[LSD] seems to have the result of sharply reducing the forces of the ego,” Bill noted, pointing out the “generally acknowledged fact in spiritual development that ego reduction makes the influx of God's grace possible. . . . [LSD] will never take the place of any of the existing means by which we can reduce the ego, and keep it reduced,” Bill acknowledged. But he went on to roll out the classic justification for spiritual innovation by noting “the probability that prayer, fasting, meditation, despair, and other conditions that predispose one to classic mystical experiences do have their chemical components.” If such exercises aided “in shutting out ego drives, opening the doors to a wider perception,” why not evaluate the more honestly chemical LSD in the same way?

## **SPIRITUALITY AND CONVERSION**

One feature of American Evangelical spirituality especially impelled Bill's fascination with LSD. The Evangelical vision insists on an experience of “conversion.” It is this experience that validates the sense and hope of being somehow *changed*, somehow *different*, somehow *new*.

America began as a quest for a new beginning. The insistence on the possibility of a totally new beginning indeed defines America. In the religious arena, as Horace Bushnell pointed out in his Finney-contemporaneous treatise on “Christian Nurture,” the discovery of that “new birth,” *conversion*, could take place in two ways: suddenly and dramatically or more measuredly, through a kind of education.

Unlike inhabitants of more traditional cultures, citizens of the United States tend to suspect not the sudden, but the gradual. And so those who experience sudden conversion usually regard their change as somehow more **genuine**. Thus it was that in spite of the

A.A. Big Book's measured words about “educational variety spiritual experiences,” Bill W. was himself drawn to seek ways of making more available the “sudden and spectacular upheavals” that although not necessary, seemed very, very useful.

### **SPIRITUAL OR RELIGIOUS?**

For a related consideration came into play, fashioning Wilson's fascination with the possibilities of LSD. From its beginnings, Alcoholics Anonymous had proclaimed its program to be “spiritual rather than religious.” A dual strategy lay behind that insistence: it rendered A.A. acceptable to religious leaders; and it lured alcoholics, who often were idealists disillusioned with religion, into initial examination of the fellowship.

But in conveying the “spiritual” aspects of the program, Wilson faced the classic problem of religious mystics: how speak of that which cannot be captured by words? A.A. spirituality is founded in an experience of release, a free-ing – the sense that one has been *saved*. To those who do not experience such an event, spirituality ever remains total mystery. And they are comforted in their condition by the extremes to which some of those others who *have* experienced it have gone. For although anyone at all aware of spirituality knows the need to attempt to “eff the ineffable,” those who actually think they achieve that are at best fanatics and at worst, bores.

Having so long refused the spiritual because of his disgust with those extremes, Wilson carefully eschewed the stock ways of describing spiritual experience. Even within Alcoholics Anonymous, he regretfully but readily admitted, both fanatics and bores flourished. Yet other members showed something else. The co-founder felt a responsibility to make that deeper, less glib experience available to a wider population of alcoholics.

But how? Bill realized that in spite of his identification with just about every alcoholic he ever met, his own background in matters of “the spiritual” was hardly typical. Unlike most drunks of his era, Bill did not in his drinking years throw over a religious background



and upbringing. He had never had either, but was rather himself an early product of the secularization that in his lifetime became ever more the American culture-religion.

Bill's "spiritual awakening" had changed all that. His experience in Towns Hospital in December 1934 had perfectly replicated the ordeals detailed in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*: the lapsing into darkness, the seeing of "a great white light," the sense of "a wind blowing not of air but of spirit," and – especially – the final feeling of great peace and calm, the perception of "the essential All-Rightness of the universe." In his LSD experiments, Bill Wilson was seeking to recapture and to extend that spiritual experience. He of course sought that for his own benefit; but he also – and even especially – hoped thus to find a way of making that experience available to other alcoholics.

### **BILL WILSON, LSD, AND DR. CARL JUNG**

In the midst of his experimentation, in 1961, Wilson finally got around to doing something he had long contemplated. Writing to Dr. Carl Jung, A.A.'s co-founder expressed gratitude for the famed psychiatrist's formative role in the pre-history of Alcoholics Anonymous. That correspondence has been often reprinted. And so it is well known that in his reply, Jung formulated an image that extended Dowling's metaphor of thirst, suggesting that alcoholism involved the struggle of *spiritus contra spiritum* – "spirits" destroying the **spiritual** in the lives of alcoholics.

It is less well known that Bill wrote a second, unreprinted, letter to the psychiatrist, one left unanswered because Jung's death intervened. In this response, Wilson apprized Jung of how much his "observation that drinking motivations often include . . . a quest for spiritual values caught our special interest." Building on that insight, Bill went on to tell Jung of his experiences with LSD, detailing his views on the "spiritual significance" of that substance. What is striking in Wilson's recital is less his rehearsing of the ideas earlier set forth to Shoemaker than how completely, albeit implicitly,

Bill re-states concerning LSD what had always been known of the connections between **alcohol** and spirituality.

## **ALCOHOL AND SPIRITUALITY**

The perception of connections between alcohol and spirituality, as the Jungian paralleling of “spirits” and *the spiritual* hints, is not peculiarly American, nor Protestant, nor even Christian: the intuition has a long and diverse history. The ancient Greeks embodied it in the figure of Dionysus. By the 1950s and 1960s, the vision, the vocabulary, and the chemical had all changed, but the era of Carlos Casteneda and Dr. Timothy Leary seemed about to bring to fulfillment Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* prediction of “soma,” the drug that would obviate the need for religion.

A relatively obscure Harvard professor at the time, Leary had in fact in 1958 sought Wilson out, asking to be included in the co-founder's experimental work with LSD. Whether this request sprang more from scientific curiosity about Bill's specific line of inquiry or was motivated by Wilson's apparently more ready access to the substance remains unclear. We know only that Bill became wary and put Leary off, one of the few individuals so treated.

Huxley, meanwhile, in an October 1958 *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Drugs that Shape Men's Minds,” declared baldly that alcoholism and other forms of drug addiction were “as much a consequence of self-transcendent yearnings as were mystical theology, spiritual exercises, and yoga.” He summed up his thoughts neatly: “The pen is mightier than the sword. But mightier than either the pen or the sword is the pill.”

A friend of Bill Wilson who was not “a friend of Bill Wilson,” Huxley elsewhere quoted Housman, hinting the problem but suggesting a cure unavailable to most alcoholics:

Malt does more than Milton can  
To justify God's ways to man.

## CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the best understanding of *addiction* presents it as an attempt to fill a spiritual void with a material reality. If there be any truth in that insight, Bill Wilson's experimentation with LSD occasions both caution and hope.

*Caution*, because even A.A.'s co-founder, despite his vast experiential knowledge of alcoholism in all its manifestations, despite all his very real albeit also very uneven personal spirituality, only most dimly recognized the extent to which his ongoing quests, even in sobriety, were expressions of what he liked to term his “malady.” As Bill had written, what he was dealing with was “cunning, baffling, powerful!” More so, apparently, than even he knew.

But the story of Bill and LSD also occasions *hope*. At a moment when we seem about to be swamped by a self-centered age's guilt-mongering gurus who would label all compassion “co-dependence,” it is refreshing to recall that even in his errors, A.A.'s co-founder was seeking ways to benefit other alcoholics. Bill never lost what recent self-styled spiritual mentors apparently never gain: the sense of humor that warned him that he could be wrong. Bill Wilson never forgot that if he, as an alcoholic in recovery, had **any** spirituality, it was a spirituality of imperfection.

The Twelve-Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous offers only “a spirituality of imperfection.” To expect more is to reject that spirituality; to hope for more is only to be human; to demand more, even of that program's first expositor, is to forget what attracted us to it in the first place.

The “lesson” of Bill Wilson's experimentation with LSD? If perfection is your goal, don't go looking for models among the members – or even the founders – of Alcoholics Anonymous.

## REFERENCES

*Lears Magazine* does not print notes, but in the hope of helping anyone interested in further investigation of this topic, I append the “Source Sheet” that their Research Department requested:

INTERVIEWEES QUOTED: NONE

PRIMARY BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Sources Interviewed but Not Quoted:

Lois Wilson (currently deceased)

Nell Wing, former secretary to Bill W.

Frank Mauser, current A.A. archivist

The ultimate primary background material is the research represented by my book, cited under Secondary Sources, and my continuing research on A.A. history.

SECONDARY SOURCES:

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#### NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS TO RESEARCH DEPARTMENT:

*Pass It On* should ease any fears of libel charges, and the Savage article contains most of the LSD background data. Everything that appears in quotation marks is a checked quotation from the source indicated. Knippel offers different quotes from W's letter to Shoemaker than does *Pass It On*.