Left Hand, Wide Eye

by Connor Freff Cochran

You will not find any from me. Not where my conversations with Lefty are concerned.

Consider the pupil of your eye (this is the anecdote part). More correctly, consider the iris, since the pupil is just a hole in the center of that extraordinary construct. The mechanism that makes the iris expand and contract in response to light intensity, nearness of focus, and things such as love and drugs (both of which dilate the pupil by causing chemical changes in a sympathetic nerve way off in the neck) consists of two separate meshes of very fine muscle fiber. These two work in tandem, pretty much like any other opposed pair of muscles in your body, such as biceps and triceps. One of the meshes radiates out from the pupil like a sunburst. When it contracts, the iris is pulled into folds, widening the pupil. The other mesh—the sphincter pupillae—runs in a circle. When this mesh tightens it closes the pupil up like tugging on a laundry bag’s drawstring. To dilate or not to dilate, that is the question...an apparently simple process that is, in truth, a complicated interaction mediated by feedback from lots of other parts of the body, including the muscles that aim the eye, the retina, and that busy body neck nerve mentioned earlier. Fortunately for us we don’t have to think about it. The process is automatic. In point of fact, it is generally considered autonomic, meaning we can’t consciously control it at all.

Only there are more things in heaven and eyesight than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio, because that’s wrong. I can control mine. I can deliberately dilate and un-dilate my pupils. Within certain limits, yes, and I can’t see worth a damn when I’m doing it (everything gets doubled and blurry), but deliberate control all the same. Last year I discovered that I can even make them pulse to a gentle beat, an utterly useless skill save possibly for weirding out people at parties.

The point? There are three of them. (1) Life is pretty strange. (2) You can discover surprising new things about yourself at any age. (3) Some of your discoveries may fly in the face of apparent logic and accepted reason.

Like what is happening between me and my left hand, for example.

Now, I am not an aficionado of drugs (this is the historical background part). In 38 years I have never been drunk, never smoked a joint, never snorted cocaine, never even put a cigarette in my mouth. Your average over-the-counter “guaranteed mild” cold remedy turns me into a zombie for days, so you won’t find any on my bathroom shelf. Even aspirin is strictly reserved for fevers of 102 degrees or greater. On the other hand, I am no puritan. I do have a deep interest in things that enhance the senses instead of dulling them, and an even deeper interest in the transformational capacity of ritual. Get blitzed and go bowling? Not me. Go to Mexico and join a ring of Huichol Indian shamans in a peyote ceremony? I’d love to; just tell me what to wear. It’s my personal belief that drugs have no place in recreation at all...but that some specific drugs, approached carefully, have a powerful potential role to play in exploration.

One of the commoner drugs I’ve used in order to explore altered consciousness is oxygen; breathing techniques are the central spine of all meditation, and you can change the shape of the world big time through controlled hyperventilation. Another drug I have tried is LSD, in the form of eight blotter acid trips spread out over the four years from 1976 to 1980. I may yet try LSD again. I’ve learned a lot since those days, and might cull something useful from refreshed experience. But looking back I would have to say that acid, after the jewel-like novelty of the first journey, was mostly disappointing. The wild leaps of mind, the emotional insights, the creative flashes that dazzled me during the arc of an LSD trip all looked pretty silly and incomprehensible afterwards.
A tingling. In my left hand.

More than a tingling, actually. A bizarre, enigmatic sensation. On the outside my left hand looked perfectly normal, but on the inside it felt like it was auditioning for a job as a special effect in a David Cronenberg film. I couldn’t square image and sensation. To the eye, four fingers and a thumb. To the hand itself, melting candlewax. To match the way it felt it should have been changing shape; sprouting new fingers and absorbing old ones; turning into anything at all but a hand.

I stared at it in some astonishment. My friend asked me what was going on. I told her. A physical therapist by training, she said “Hmm. Sounds to me like you just reclaimed something.”

“But what?”

“Well, were you left-handed as a child and trained out of it?”

Nope. A rightie born and bred, as far as I knew. But one of the delights of Ecstasy is that it allows you to do more than think of alternatives; it lets you actually try them on for a comparative fit. So I thought to myself “Well, what if that were actually true?”

And the tingling stopped. Just like that.

If the story ended there, though, I’d have no reason to commit these events to print.

That night I noticed that I was automatically reaching for things with my left hand instead of my right. The toothbrush. Doorknobs. Hands to shake. By the middle of the next day the plain fact was unavoidable—my left hand had somehow woken up and was demanding sovereign equality. Within a week I was brushing my teeth with both hands, shaving with both hands, eating with both hands. After years of uncomfortable accommodation to a watch, I shifted it from left wrist to right and suddenly everything felt fine. My right hand was experienced at following orders, and objected not. My left hand, rebellious, would have none of it.

At this point I decided it might be time to read a certain self-help book I had bought months before and then studiously ignored. This tome fell into the generalized category of “discovering the Inner Child” but took the (suddenly interesting) approach of advocating written dialogs between dominant and non-dominant hands. Page after page of this book contained reproductions of such dialogs, by the author and her clients, and I found them fascinating. The technique was simple. Ask questions or make comments while writing with your dominant hand, then trade off, clear your mind, and let your non-dominant hand write whatever it wants to, even if it comes out gibberish.

I decided to give it a try… and met Lefty. Here is that brief initial dialog, unedited:

What’s going on between me and Sharon?

LOVE. YOU LOVE HER BUT AREN’T LETTING YOURSELF FEEL IT.

Then what are all these emotions?
ACTING. THE NAME, NOT THE ROCK.
So what do I do?
BE REAL.
I don’t know what that is.
BEING REAL IS SPEAKING THE WORDS THAT WANT TO BE SPOKEN NOT WHAT YOU THINK WANTS TO BE HEARD.
It hurts.
SINCE YOU WERE BORN. IT PROTECTED YOU.
From what?
I CAN’T TELL YOU THAT YET. YOU ARE TOO STIFF IN THE HEAD. OPEN WIDE.
Great. First time out, and my “non-dominant” hand was dominating me. In the book it hadn’t been that way. But I was intrigued by the intensity of the emotions that the experiment raised, as well as by the weird mix of abstract and specific in my left hand’s comments. So I continued, and over the next month a strange rough poetry of insight, demand, directive, and language was worked out between “us.” There were things coming through my left hand that startled me, inspiring rich, unexpected trains of thought. Reflecting on certain phrases moved things in my heart and life that I had previously considered unshakable.
ASK WHO YOU WERE BEFORE YOU WERE HERE.
GIVE YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS A BREAK. IT IS ONLY BUILT TO OBSERVE AND RECORD. LET IT KEEP THAT JOB. LEAVE DANCING AND CREATION TO YOUR BODY.
FEAR MAKES ANYONE POOR.
IF CANDLES COULD LIGHT THEMSELVES THERE WOULD BE NO DARKNESS.
YOU CAN’T SHED A SKIN BEFORE IT STIFFENS.
NOT BEING FROM HERE MEANS THAT YOU CAN BE ANY OF THEM.
BE EVEN STILLER.
BE THE WATER IN YOU, AND NOT THE CARBON STEEL.
THERE IS NO WAY TO HEAL A CUT BY ASKING TO KISS THE KNIFE.
THE NATURE OF PEOPLE, LIKE PHOTONS, IS THAT ALL CAUSES ARE CORRECT AND ALL OUTCOMES POSSIBLE. PHOTONS HAVE CHOICE. PEOPLE, BEING MADE OF LOTS OF PHOTONS, HAVE LOTS OF CHOICE.
PAIN IS A STRETCH YOU ARE NOT GIVING IN TO.
DOORS ARE JUST A WAY WE RATIONALIZE FINDING OURSELVES ON THE OTHER SIDE.

To date the transcripts of my left-hand conversations fill more than 200 pages. I’ve learned a lot in the process, and my foundations have been rattled more than once—especially when I explored, for a time, letting Lefty gab with other people through me (talk about new heights in disassociation!).

And then there is the matter of the songs. Oh yes.
Between 1979 and 1991 I wrote something like 75 songs, most of them quite laboriously. The Emperor Franz Josef thought Mozart used “too many notes.” My new collaborator (and fellow Keyboard columnist) Brent Hurtig thought I used “too many words.” After looking through my stack of tunes he found only five he thought worth developing.

Then one day I told him about Lefty, and showed him ten lines of seemingly abstract poetry that had come through a few days before. To my great surprise he loved them. In minutes he had composed music to fit, then turned to me and demanded more. One verse does not make a song, he said. Two more. Now.

I took up pencil in my left hand, nervously…and watched as it slowly and carefully wrote out exactly what Brent wanted. Two more verses, perfectly matched in meter, structure, and tone to the one he was on fire for. Wilder yet, the new verses completed the first one conceptually. What had been a meaningless fragment was now a meaningful song. Done. And we’d both been witness to it.

Wow.

14 months and 60 new songs later I have come to trust the process, but am still surprised by it. These songs are not so much written as found, gifts from the other side of an inexplicable doorway. The pencil in my left hand moves across the page. I watch the words, wondering exactly what’s coming next. In the end they always make their own kind of coherent, compelling sense; and they sing like a dream.

So what’s going on, eh? Shall we get Freudian and explain this in terms of Ego and Id? Shall we cast it in terms of right brain/left brain theory? Shall we speak of angels? You tell me. Better still, try it for yourself and then tell me. Perhaps you have unknown treasures to find, too. All I know is that I feel like a red-mud Oklahoma farmer who has struck oil on land he was about to sell for ten cents an acre. One day I went to sleep with a good right hand and something useful for holding forks steady. The next day I woke up with two strong wings.

Like I said earlier. Life is pretty strange. And some of the discoveries in it challenge the boundaries of reason. But on the other side of that rationalized left-hand door, by whatever name you’d call him or definition you’d ascribe, I think I’ve found a friend. •

Originally appearing in the March 1993 issue of Keyboard magazine, this essay is part of Connor Freff’s long-running “Creative Options” series. More pieces from the series can be found at www.Freff.com. You can also order the first Creative Options book collection, Brave Confessions, by contacting Conlan Press in any of the following ways. Mail: Conlan Press, 712 Bancroft Road #109, Walnut Creek, CA 94598. Phone: 925-932-9500. Fax: 925-932-9551. E-mail: info@conlanpress.com. On the web: www.conlanpress.com.
STEVEN ROOKE, HYPERSEA, (above) 1997, digital image
ENTRANCED, (lower) 1997, digital image
“In 1976 during an LSD trip with my husband, Alex, I experienced my body turning into infinite strands of light that were both a fountain and a drain. As I lay meditating next to Alex, I could see that he too had been revealed as a fountain and drain, individual and distinct but connected to my ‘energy unit.’ I realized that all beings and things were ‘blowing off’ and ‘sucking in’ pure energy in an infinite field of confluent effluences. The energy was love, the unifying force. This changed both of our artwork as we felt that we had witnessed the most important thing: a revelation of the grid upon which the fabric of our material reality is draped. Sometime thereafter, I read a quote describing the Jewel Net of Indra. In the abode of Indra, the Hindu God of Space, there is a net that stretches infinitely in all directions. At every intersection of the net there is a jewel so highly polished and perfect that it reflects every other jewel in the net. This description related powerfully to the revelation that we had received while in our altered state. It has been my continuing intention to point to this experience in my artwork.” — Allyson Grey