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The 30th anniversary of Dr. Walter Pahnke's classic Good Friday experiment is April 17, 1992

Despite the media's general reluctance to report on the beneficial use of psychedelics, Alex Beam's Op-Ed piece was printed in The Boston Globe 11/25/91 The Baltimore Sun 12/4/91 and other papers across the country

Getting real about drugs

ALEX BEAM

It was almost 30 years ago that a group of 20 young seminarians from Andover-Newton Theological School gathered in the basement of Boston University's Marsh Chapel to participate in an experiment using psychedelic drugs.

Organized by Walter Pahnke, a graduate student in religion and society, assisted by a young Harvard researcher named Timothy Leary and encouraged by the Rev. Howard Thurman, the charismatic black chaplain of Boston University, half the group swallowed psilocybin, a hallucinogen derived from mushrooms, while their colleagues ingested niacin tablets. Then all 20 filed into pews to listen to Thurman's Good Friday sermon and reflect upon Christ's Passion on the cross.

Pahnke believed that the psilocybin would induce mystical religious visions, and he hypothesized that the drug experiences would exert a long-term positive influence on his subjects' lives. Little did he know that his Good Friday experiment, which created a furor at the time, would be one of the last scientifically controlled tests using psychedelics. Shortly after the experiment, Leary was booted out of Harvard and psilocybin was outlawed. Pahnke died in 1971.

Rick Doblin, a young researcher at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has spent four years tracking down the 20 participants in the Good Friday experiment. One has died, one has disappeared. Of the remaining 18, all but one agreed to discuss their experiences with him. Ten of the 18 subjects whom Doblin located entered the ministry, while the rest fanned out among other professions.

By and large, they agree that the psilocybin experience had a lasting, positive effect on their lives. In an article just published in the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, Doblin writes: "The subjects unanimously described their psilocybin experience as having had elements of a genuinely mystical nature and characterized it as one of the highpoints of their spiritual life."

Robert Kirven, who at the time was writing a thesis on spiritual reality, remembers feeling like a skeleton and experiencing his own death. "It was a very vivid opening onto another aspect of reality," he said. "Here I thought I knew what I was talking about; it was like writing about China and then getting a chance to go there."

Several psilocybin subjects had profound mystical experiences, prompting one to tell Doblin: "I would want my kids to take it."

But Doblin's follow-up research also uncovered some of the experiment's darker moments. Two subjects found the combination of the hallucinogen and Thurman's vivid Passion sermon to be overwhelming. When Thurman urged his listeners to spread the news about the crucifixion, one seminarian rushed onto Commonwealth Avenue to announce the good news and had to be restrained.

More chillingly, one of the subjects experienced what Pahnke called a "psychotic episode," and was given an injection of the powerful tranquilizer thiorazine — a fact Pahnke never mentioned in his writings. Six months after the experiment, the man reported "slightly harmful" negative persisting effects. Almost 30 years later, the man's colleagues told Doblin that "his experience caused no persisting dysfunction and may even have had some beneficial as well as detrimental effects." The subject refused to talk to Doblin.

Doblin, who is also the president of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, believes his follow-up to Pahnke's original research argues for the legalization of drugs, which he supports. I don't support the full legalization of drugs, but if dissemination of Doblin's work helps quell the antidrug hysteria in this country, so much the better.

My own children are learning about illicit drugs from public-service advertisements aired during Saturday-morning cartoon shows, thus whetting their interest in the forbidden fruit of which their parents partook. Some drugs are dangerous and are properly outlawed. Other controlled substances provide medical benefits. As the aging hipsters might say: It's time to get real about drugs.

Alex Beam is a Globe columnist.