

## psilocybin: concord prison follow-up

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**a** UNIQUE PSILOCYBIN experiment was conducted in the early 1960's under the direction of Timothy Leary, Ph.D. Dr. Leary had obtained permission from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections to administer psilocybin to volunteers in Concord Prison who were nearing the time of their release. The experimental hypothesis was that psilocybin could catalyze a peak experience that would help the prisoner to break out of the cycle of antisocial behavior, thereby reducing recidivism. This behavior change was supposed to take place as a result of the action of psilocybin to open the prisoners' eyes to the consequences of their past behavior and to connect them to an inner source of spiritual strength that would empower them to rewrite the scripts of their lives and resist the temptations to commit additional crimes.

Over the course of the last several years, Michael Forcier, Ph.D. and I have been conducting a long-term follow-up to that experiment. We obtained permission from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections and the Governor's Office to review the criminal history records of the original participants in the study. Our review of the records was completed in 1995. We learned that the experimental subjects had a long-term recidivism rate no better than the average base rate for recidivism for inmates at Concord Prison. This meant that the psilocybin experiences alone were not sufficient to reduce recidivism. We noted that Dr. Leary acknowledged the limitations of the psilocybin experience in an early paper he wrote about the experiment and recommended that the psilocybin experiences be supplemented with post-release group support meetings and halfway house living arrangements. After Dr. Leary was dismissed from Harvard, support for these arrangements dissipated.

### **Ex-Prisoners and the Ex-Professor**

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### **Good Friday Experiment**

Longtime readers of the MAPS newsletter may recall that I conducted a twenty-five+ year follow-up study to the Good Friday experiment, a study conducted in 1962 by Walter Pahnke, M.D. under the direction of Dr. Leary. That study experimentally tested the hypothesis that psilocybin could catalyze genuine spiritual experiences in people who were religiously inclined and who took the psilocybin within a religious context.

The results of the Good Friday experiment confirmed its experimental hypothesis while the results of the Concord Prison experiment did not. This difference illustrates the distance between a religious experience, which can be catalyzed by a drug, and a religious (moral) life, which requires much more than just a drug experience.

Coincidentally, I was invited to participate in a panel discussion about the Good Friday experiment in Berkeley the night before the meeting of the subjects from the Concord Prison experiment. Also on the panel were Rev. Mike Young, one of the original subjects in the Good Friday experiment who contributed an article to the last issue of the MAPS Bulletin, Bob Jesse, founder of the Council on Spiritual Practices, and Rev. Karla Hansen, a Unitarian minister.

### **Need for New Research**

As many of the MAPS readers may have heard, Dr. Leary is suffering from cancer and is quite close to the end of his life. I imagine it must be somewhat reassuring for him to know that two experiments that he conducted over 30 years ago are still of interest to people after all this time. What makes me sad is to realize that the two experiments he supervised, each a classic in its field, have never been replicated or refined despite the promising results of the Good Friday experiment and the suggestions about ways to improve the results of the Concord Prison experiment.

To the extent that it is able, MAPS will work in 1996 to expand the field of psychedelic research beyond the investigation of the medical uses of psychedelics to include studies that will focus on the role that psychedelics can play in religious experience and behavior change. •

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