

## Interviewer's Statement — **The Imprint of an LSD Experiment, Forty Years Later**

Kate Obata

BETWEEN THE YEARS of 1954 and 1962, Dr. Oscar Janiger administered LSD to nearly 900 volunteers in the Los Angeles area as part of a clinical experiment. Dr. Janiger's study took place in a time before there was any social stigma attached to the drug or to any other psychedelic. In 1997, decades later, I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to interview 44 of those subjects. The interaction with each of them left a valuable impression on me, as they summed up the events of their lives since they had been given LSD by Dr. Janiger about 40 years ago—enough time to give each person a unique perspective on how a singular experience may have affected his or her life.

**I** FELT AS THOUGH many of the respondents could be my grandparents, especially since they were from the same generation as my grandparents, except the stories they had to tell were about an acid trip they had forty years ago. They offered tea and cookies and told me about colorful visions and insights they had from the most remote parts of their psyche. When a subject had something good to say about the experience, it would often turn into a very moving story, vividly recalled as if the event happened just yesterday. One man spoke of a vision that was three-dimensional and shape-shifting through a spectrum of forms of lust, love, happiness, sorrow, fear, envy, hate, excitement. He said that it taught him how to experience his own emotions, something that he was previously not able to do.

Sometimes simply hearing about the visions gave me a new perspective about life. One subject had envisioned that he was at the funeral of an old sage, where there were monks in saffron robes, one of whom placed a flower in his hand that blossomed and died and then blossomed again, repeating the cycle over and over. Sometimes the visions recalled were simply bizarre, such as a man thinking that he got into an airplane, flew himself to the moon, and explored the lunar surface. One notable story was from a man who, after his LSD experience, switched his career track from being a high school physical education instructor to writing metaphysical books and going on

lecture tours with Alan Watts (incidentally, another subject in Janiger's original research).

A few subjects found the experience to be therapeutic. Surprisingly, one woman, though she wept during her interview about the recent death of her cocaine-abusing daughter and was strictly against any recreational drug use (I wouldn't be surprised if she had a "Just Say No" bumper sticker on her car), swore that LSD was so psychologically beneficial to her that she felt strongly that it should be legalized for medical use. But she insisted that it would have to be administered only by a qualified psychiatrist.

There was only one truly negative report, and it affected me, the interviewer, in a very strange way. The man was polite and brief and did not mention any detail about the experience; he only said that it was very negative and that he burned his copy of the essay he wrote about it a month after the trip, so as to erase the memory (I had read Dr. Janiger's copy of his essay on file, although I did not disclose this to him). He showed absolutely no emotion during the interview and appeared to be numb. When I returned home, I sank into my chair with an extraordinarily heavy feeling; tears swelled in my eyes, and I had no idea why I felt so depressed. This feeling lasted for a while until I realized that I had taken on the negative, deeply repressed psychic energy of the man I had just interviewed. Then it passed. It finally made sense to me why therapists have such a high rate of depression. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to address his internal conflicts and left the issues unresolved, burying them even deeper.

The subjects of Dr. Janiger's clinical studies are a valuable resource of information about the phenomenological, adverse or therapeutic effects of LSD, especially because it is extremely difficult to legally conduct human LSD experiments today. Because LSD sometimes had a strong impact in the subject's lives, even 40 years later, it leads me to believe that it might be very powerful psychiatric tool, but must be used with caution. •