

Duncan Blewett: A Life's Work, Maybe More

Larry Schor, PhD

IT WAS DURING MY LAST VISIT TO MEXICO that I came to understand Duncan more fully. Although the trip had been planned for months, his wife, also a psychologist, had voiced increasing concern about Duncan's memory loss. He had always seemed the 'absent minded professor,' but those of us who knew him well were aware that his mind was never absent; only tuned to a different frequency or dimension. The fear was that this tuning was something more; something organic, and turning. I remembered, a few years earlier during a class he was teaching, when Duncan was unable to retrieve a word from his extensive vocabulary. He looked up at the students and said, "The nouns are the first to go."

We did not yet know for certain that Alzheimer's disease had invaded his lovely and brilliant intellect. And so it was that this trip carried with it the burden that I was there, in part, to render both my personal and professional assessment of Duncan's mental status.

Duncan knew this. It was an uncomfortable role for both of us: He, my dearest mentor, who had established himself as a pioneering psychologist long before my birth, and me, his pupil, friend, and even disciple. He knew more than I about psychological assessment and had been trained by the very best, the people we read about in our textbooks during our doctoral training. He toyed with me by vacillating among the roles of caricature of the mental patient, co-researcher, and desperate friend. He knew why I was asking questions like, "Do you remember who stopped by this morning?" or "What room were we in before this one?" His answers were discouraging at times.

A few days later, we had the opportunity to spend some time alone. He took LSD; I did not. I had seen Duncan under the influence of the drug many times over the course of nearly twenty years, but, unlike anyone else I have ever known, there simply was no obvious difference. With LSD, he was more animated and there was a

notable intensity to his observations and insights. He was lighter and even more fun to be with. It was like fresh batteries or high-octane fuel. But this session was different: He looked at me with even more than the usual clarity in his eyes and said, "I'm as lucid as I have ever been or will likely be again. If there is anything you would like to ask me, now is a good time."

So, I asked him how and why he had become a psychologist. More specifically, I asked how he had become involved in the legendary LSD research in

Saskatchewan with Humphry Osmond, Abram Hoffer, and others. He began by describing his experience in World War II, where he was stationed in Italy as an artilleryman firing mortars at an unseen enemy. He spent months in the hospital recovering from what I gathered to be a combination of exhaustion, disease, and perhaps broken-heartedness.

Now, watching the ocean, his demeanor changed dramatically as he recalled finding himself in London on V.E. (Victory in Europe) Day. He described countless thousands of people crawling out of the shelters into the daylight. Everyone was embracing each other, embracing life itself. Not only for Duncan was there the promise that the war would be won, but there was also the certainty that humankind had learned its lesson this time. I suppose it was as if the war had been like the worst acid trip imaginable, and V.E. day like dosing humanity with Ecstasy.

Duncan truly believed that he was witnessing human transformation at a collective and irreversible level. He was convinced that we were approaching the onset of the "great elation." It turned out, as we both knew, that he was not only wrong, but tragically naïve as well. But I appreciated in a new way how the contrast of these experiences had crystallized Duncan's singular duty to preach the gospel of peace and love long before these became slogans of the counter-culture movement of the sixties.

After the war, Canadian veterans were given the choice of either a lump sum payment or an education, and Duncan chose the latter, enrolling at the University of British Columbia for Bachelors and Masters degrees, and receiving a full scholarship at the University of London



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where he earned his doctorate in a mere eighteen months under the legendary and controversial Hans Eysenk. After completing his studies, Duncan worked in Illinois with the famed personality theorist Raymond Cattell, publishing articles that employed rigorous statistical procedures to investigate heritability of personality traits. But soon tiring of attempts to classify personality into discrete and measurable elements, Duncan accepted the position as the first Chief Psychologist in Saskatchewan, Canada, where there was a progressive government as well as recognition that little cure was available for the afflicted in the large mental hospitals where patients often remained for twenty-five years or more.

And so it was that Duncan returned to Canada and the Prairie to fight a different kind of war. This time, the casualties were psychological; people whose minds were ravaged by schizophrenia facing an all but hopeless future. Word had gotten around that Albert Hofmann had synthesized LSD-25, a powerful drug that elicited profound alterations in sensation and perception. There were anecdotal reports of people losing their minds, finding their way, or both.

As I understand it, the hypotheses were twofold: First, a chemically-induced state eliciting hallucinations and delusions might provide a “model psychosis,” wherein the psychologist could gain a glimpse of what it was really like to be psychotic. In doing so, Duncan and his colleagues paved the way for a transformation in the field of psychotherapy. Such a transformation involved a paradigmatic shift from a vision of psychotherapy in which the therapist remains neutral and objective, to the development of the deepest possible empathy, wherein the psychotherapist joins in the therapeutic struggle in an attempt to see out of the patients’ eyes, rather than merely look into them.



The Duncan Blewett

Memorial Research Fund

To honor the compassionate and courageous work of this pioneering psychedelic researcher, MAPS is accepting donations for psychedelic research in Duncan’s name. Duncan’s widow, Dr. June Blewett, has started the fund with a generous \$5,000 donation. Please consider honoring Duncan’s life by making a generous gift to this fund.

The second and related hypothesis was rooted in Humphrey Osmond’s coining of the term, *psychedelic*, or “mind manifesting.” Perhaps the psychedelic experience might allow us a glimpse of the inner workings of the human mind.

Although Duncan continued to use the language of a scientist, he was becoming a mystic, or as he preferred to call it, a psychonaut, an astronaut exploring inner space rather than outer space. He maintained his sense of academic rigor as evidenced in his 1959 manuscript, *Handbook for the Therapeutic Use of Lysergic Acid Diethylamide-25, Individual and Group Procedures*, which remains relevant to this day.

Duncan was indeed and in deeds a man ahead of his time. In fact, he was precisely a half-century ahead of his time. Thanks to MAPS, the world has just about caught up to where Duncan was fifty years ago. Duncan often commented that he was ecstatic to see the progress that MAPS is making in establishing the safety and efficacy of psychedelic therapy according to modern drug development standards.

It is in this spirit that MAPS is pleased to establish the Duncan Blewett Memorial Psychedelic Research Fund. Perhaps understanding the depth and range of human experience Duncan described first in war and later (like so many others) through the therapeutic use of LSD, might help people to prevent the next suicide, act of despair, child abuse, or even the next war, as we realize the potential power of mindfulness, connectedness, and love.

To kick-start this memorial fund, Duncan’s widow, Dr. June Blewett, has generously made a \$5,000 gift. She encourages those who wish to honor Duncan’s legacy to join her in supporting psychedelic research.

A celebration is being held all over the world and everyone is invited. It begins now! •