

Preparing for the Final Passage:

Dr. Oscar Janiger, M.D.

(February 8, 1918 - August 14, 2001)

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in THE EARLY 1980s Albert Hofmann said he had to introduce me to someone who was one of the most interesting people he had ever met, and who also possessed one of the most amazing libraries he had ever seen. From our auspicious introduction to the moment of his passing, Dr. Oscar Janiger, affectionately known as Oz, and I remained dear friends, passing countless hours together in conversation at each of our homes and on several exploration-vacations.

Oz was one of the original pioneers of LSD research, focusing on its effects on creativity, consciousness, and therapeutic use. Working in the era when LSD was still legal, he administered LSD to an estimated 1,000 people in guided sessions from 1954 to 1962. His many volunteers included such notables as Anais Nin, Aldous Huxley, Cary Grant and Jack Nicholson. A prolific researcher, Oz maintained extensive files, which still provide an unparalleled and largely untapped resource for the study of the creative and therapeutic effects of LSD.

Oz was one of the world's greatest conversationalists and storytellers. Oz would pepper his many stories with jokes that almost always offered a pithy insight into human nature. His Santa Monica house, which also served as his private practice office, was always open, a manifestation of Oz's approach to life. One could walk in, day or night, and more often than not meet and converse with an exceptionally interesting person, many of who became immediate friends.

Oz always stressed that it was important to maintain an attitude of inquisitiveness and openness to the world. He had a remarkable ability to be both non-judgmental about people and at the same time quickly and clearly see and understand the core nature of their being. During the course of his life he helped and saved the lives of numerous persons through his psychiatric practice and friendship.

In this article, written to address the subject of death and dying, it is worth noting

that some two hundred family, close friends and associates attended his private memorial, in testimony to the effect he had on so many lives. In my remarks on that occasion, I mentioned some Oz-ism's, as I refer to his freely shared pearls of wisdom. Amongst them, "when taking medicine, take plenty," "find your optimum sleep/awake cycle," and most relevant to this discussion, "nothing that wise men have written or said prepares one for the approach of one's death."

As Oz himself reached a point where he could see death on the horizon, he experienced what he described as one of the worst, if not the worst, experiences of his life. On February 17, 2001, six months before his own death, he awoke to find his wife Kathleen lying dead next to him. The experience affected him deeply and drove home to him his impending fate in a way that nothing else could.

Perhaps in a premonition of writing this article, I made some notes at the time of our discussions during a holiday dinner on December 12, 1999, about a year and a half before his death. Oz was reflecting on his now all-consuming experience of the later stages of Old Age, an aspect of the process of dying that he found himself poorly prepared to deal with. What follows in the next two paragraphs is a paraphrasing of his words from that evening's discussion.

Old Age, at least in the West, is treated as a disease. There was nothing he had found in Western culture, nor in the various teachings of many otherwise more enlightened cultures, that prepared one for the onset of Old Age,

and the changes that occur during the final period of life. From the people Oz had spoken to, or whose writings he had read during the course of his uniquely rich life, from disciples of Eastern metaphysical systems to the Dalai Lama himself, none had enunciated anything that would help one prepare for the effects of late Old Age.

Nothing had prepared him for the effect of waking up and realizing he now lacked sufficient energy to carry out daily intentions, to work on the projects that had been the mainstay of his life, and to help the patients he had devoted much of his life to serving. Especially in the West, one no longer has the authority that one once had. Where one once served, he or she must now be served. It is in many ways a complete reversal of one's prior existence. Students of Eastern teachings seem to rely on being to carry them through this period, but even they can only meditate or bask in the ecstasy of pure being for so long, as one still has a foot in existence. Many teachings and religions attempt to prepare one for death and the possibility of "something more," but what about the preparation for Old Age? Preparation on all levels: from having sufficient material resources to provide for one's physical care, to the spiritual resources that enable one to gracefully navigate through each precious day, knowing it is one of your last—is sorely lacking from any source.

When discussing death with his friends, Oz never expressed fear about dying, but he was concerned about how he would die. He did not want to be in pain, and had made preparations to ensure that. He also did not want to die alone, and had asked his dearest friends to be at his side when the moment arrived. Oz believed in something beyond death. He explained that at death we transition to another plane of being, so when the moment came, he was prepared to accept this next stage. Three days before his death, he confided to his long time friend, Michael Levy, that he was "really tired, tired of being ill, and was no longer getting any gratification from life."

In the early hours of August 14, 2001, a small group of family and friends gathered around Oz in his private hospital room, maintaining a vigil of warmth and compassion, friendship and love, as he moved nearer and nearer to his final transition. In the hours before his passing, we became aware of his final conscious act as a researcher. Not one to miss an opportunity for exploration of consciousness and being, Oz was determined to depart in the tradition established by his friend and colleague Aldous Huxley. Oz had imbibed 100 micrograms of LSD.

While it is highly unlikely we will receive any reports from Oz about his last experiment, we can gather implications of the effect the LSD had on him from three incidents we observed during his final hours.

Oz had previously asked his dear friend Vijali Hamilton, to be by his side when he passed away, and her report of what occurred in his last few hours is worthy of note. "I will always remember those moments when he became conscious and he was looking into my eyes for such a long time. I felt it was a profound communication and a preparation for him letting go."

Shortly after that, sensing the time was near, I gave Oz a

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goodbye kiss on the forehead. Then, as Oz's son Robbie and I were both gazing into his face, leaning over him so as to be able to see the nuances of expression on his face, a smile formed across Oz's face as he emitted a palpable glow of warmth and joy. He then grabbed Michael Levy's hand, squeezing it so hard Michael thought Oz would crush it. Michael closed his eyes and experienced a vision of a spirit going through him, flying through a green English-like field, over a stonewall, into a giant green forest, and then suddenly disappearing into a radiant blue sky. Michael opened his eyes to see Oz's final exhalation.

We knew then that his last experiment was a success and he had moved on in peace to "another plane." I was then moved to begin Tibetan chanting as calm and light emanated from the core of Oz's being, and the room filled with an ethereal stillness.

In honoring the memory of an extraordinary being, we can only hope that the honesty and openness with which he shared the experiences of his final days, can serve as a stimulus to awaken us to the preparation necessary to weather the months, days, and hours before our own final voyage.

Other elders, who have communicated their wisdom on life's end, usually focus their attention on preparations for the moment of death itself. Oz, on the other hand, focused attention on the stage between the end of Old Age and death, a critical period in everyone's life when our physical powers diminish, but we still have sufficient intention to engage in conscious action. He understood that what we do during that time is an individual choice. So rather than give specifics of how to handle this period, he illuminated our awareness to help us distinguish and prepare for this time, short for some, longer for others, that falls between the end of Old Age and the moment of death. For Oz, this final period preceding death was one of, if not the, most critical times in his life, and for the gift of sharing that wisdom, we owe a debt of everlasting gratitude to Oz. •

Oz Janiger and Robert "Rio" Hahn

