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Remembering Timothy Leary

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[Note: Jon Carroll graciously lent me his column to publish this eulogy in *The San Francisco Chronicle* on May 31, 1996.]

I first met Timothy Leary when I was a producer at Activision, trying to keep up with his wildly complex ideas about a videogame based on cinema and interpersonal psychology. On my first trip down to LA to work with him he met me at the airport, striding down the concourse dressed in white pants, a white sweater, white sneakers and white hair, and whisked me off in an old pea-green Mercedes with broken seat belts. (The second time I came down I had to call him from the airport for directions. "Get to the Beverly Hilton," he said, "and then you just come whirling and swirling up the hill.") There were always dozens of people at Tim's house – mostly young, sometimes famous, always burning with energy and fiercely fond of the old man. At the end of that first hard day's work, Tim broke some brownies out of the freezer. "Dr. Leary," I said, "are those, uh, marijuana brownies?" He looked at me in mock astonishment. "I'm Timothy Leary," he explained.

But Timothy Leary didn't die of split chromosomes, marijuana lungs, or incurable drug-induced insanity. He died of an old man's disease, just plain old prostate cancer. He also drank too much alcohol and smoked too many cigarettes. He went to West Point, did you know that? - and built a patio on his house in Berkeley in the 50s with his own hands, for the kids to play on. Eerily standard American stuff.

From his book *Flashbacks* I learned about the amazing energy and dedication with which he was persecuted by nearly every level of law enforcement, finally landing in solitary in Folsom prison for possession of a roach. "As I walked toward the cell," he told me, "I knew I had a choice - I could either have a really bad time or I could learn something. I started learning."

America will have to ask itself what it was about Dr. Tim that was so damned scary. He was a Berkeley Ph.D. who was one of the founders of interpersonal psychology, and a Harvard professor who was completely absorbed with studying the human brain and fell into research involving psychedelics long before they were illegal. His transgression, in Calvinist America, may simply have been that he stumbled onto an instant source of illumination and joy. These things are supposed to cost you, bigtime, and they are supposed to come from the Big Guy in Heaven, not the resources of your own mind under the influence of a plant or a chemical compound or even a spiritual discipline, unless it is devoted to a divine Other from whom the gift of enlightenment flows. Although he wasn't particularly anti-Christian (he attended Sacred Heart - did you know that?), Dr. Tim's fundamental humanism challenged every sort of authority, from religion to law.

During the late 80s and early 90s Timothy and I often found ourselves speaking at the same conferences, usually devoted to virtual reality or technology and culture, in places like Barcelona, Linz (he called it "Hitler's home town"), and Normal, Illinois. It was heart-warming to see how his basic message affected the kids in his audience. He sat on the edge of the stage at the college in Normal and in his breathy, awestruck voice revealed the great

secret: "You are the owner and operator of your own brain." This wasn't about acid - it was about autonomy, agency, and the great secret that we have within us a deep source of personal power.

After his talk in Normal some of the students invited him back to their apartment. It was a perfect replica of a 60s pad, complete with black light and Hendrix poster. They addressed him reverently. Tiring of the sedate conversation, Tim decided that everyone should get rowdy and dance. We whirled and swirled around the apartment to vintage Stones. The kids loved it. Finally he asked somebody to pour him a drink. After some embarrassed scrambling in the kitchen, a fellow was dispatched to the neighbor's for a shot of Bourbon - there wasn't a drop of booze or a speck of marijuana in the house.

The most important thing I learned from Timothy was tolerance. He could find something to appreciate in anybody. He listened to everyone who talked to him. He never treated a fan or a student like an inferior, nor did he fawn on celebrities. He steadfastly refused to judge people. "Liddy's okay," he said when I asked him how on earth he could go on a world speaking tour with the man who first established himself in "law enforcement" with the Millbrook bust. "Liddy's intense. Liddy's Liddy."

The last time I saw Tim he was luminous. I could feel the heat pouring off his body as he sat a foot away, but when he reached over and took my hand his skin was cool and dry. "Every day is a precious jewel," he whispered in that awesome-secret voice.

Leary's Leary. I love you, Tim.

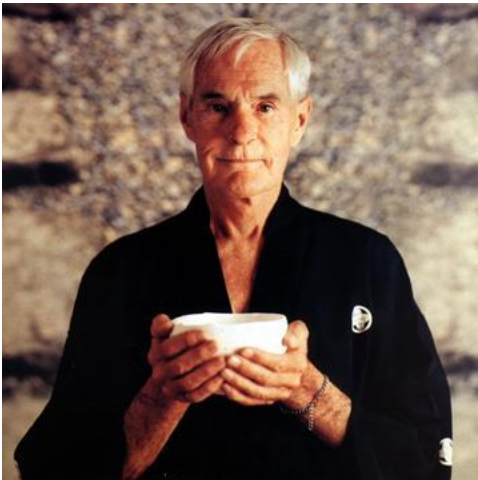


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