

'PASS IT ON'



*The Story of Bill Wilson
and how the A.A. message
reached the world*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Bill's prodigious labor to put together a truly representative service structure for the Fellowship did not go unnoticed in the rest of the world. Aldous Huxley, author ("Brave New World"), teacher, philosopher, and pioneer of New Age consciousness, was the man who called Bill "the greatest social architect of the century."

Bill met Huxley through their mutual friend Gerald Heard, the British radio commentator, anthropologist, and metaphysician¹ whom the Wilsons had first visited at his Trabuco campus in the winter of 1943-44. Bill and Huxley had an immediate rapport, a rapport that Bill, incidentally, was immensely proud of. They had much in common, although Huxley was not an alcoholic.

Through the same connection, Bill was introduced to two English psychiatrists whose field was of immediate interest to him. These two men, Drs. Humphry Osmond and Abram Hoffer, were working with alcoholics and schizophrenics in a mental hospital in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, trying through various

methods to break through these patients' resistance, so that they could be reached and helped. While Bill had discovered a way to break through resistance — or, as he called it, that often impenetrable and always thick wall called ego — through spiritual surrender and deflation at depth, Drs. Osmond and Hoffer had been trying to reach the same end through chemical means.

At the time Bill met them, they were using an experimental synthetic chemical called lysergic acid diethylamide, manufactured in Europe by Sandoz, a Swiss pharmaceutical company. This substance would later become known — and notorious — by its nickname, LSD. In 1954, when Osmond and Hoffer began their experiments, no one had ever heard of it; it was so new and so experimental that no regulations or restrictions governing or controlling its usage existed.

The two psychiatrists' original theory about why it might work for their particular purpose was quickly abandoned when they saw what in fact was happening. This is how Humphry Osmond describes both theory and actual experience:

"In 1954, Abram Hoffer and I, using LSD and mescaline [for] schizophrenia, conceived the idea that they represented something very similar to delirium tremens — that a good many people who really give up alcohol do so on basis of the fact that they've had an attack of D.T.'s and been impressed by them. We [thought] it might be a very good idea to give a person an 'attack' before he'd been completely destroyed. This was our original theory. We found, in fact, that this wasn't quite how it worked. [It was] really not unlike Bill's experience, which I later heard about — it gave a number of people pause for thought, not on the grounds of how terrifying it was, but how illuminating it was. Rather different!

"I went down and was introduced to Bill and told him about it, and he was extremely unthrilled. He was very much against giving alcoholics drugs."

Later, however, Bill became interested when he heard that the two doctors were getting results. As he observed the work

closely, he arrived at this conclusion: It was not "the material itself [that] actually produces these experiences. It seems to have the result of sharply reducing the forces of the ego — temporarily, of course. It is a generally acknowledged fact in spiritual development that ego reduction makes the influx of God's grace possible. If, therefore, under LSD we can have a temporary reduction, so that we can better see what we are and where we are going — well, that might be of some help. The goal might become clearer. So I consider LSD to be of some value to some people, and practically no damage to anyone. It will never take the place of any of the existing means by which we can reduce the ego, and keep it reduced."

With that attitude, Bill undertook further investigation of the possible uses of LSD in treating alcoholics. Nell Wing remembers the sequence of events: "There were alcoholics in the hospitals, of whom A.A. could touch and help only about five percent. The doctors started giving them a dose of LSD, so that the resistance would be broken down. And they had about 15 percent recoveries. This was all a scientific thing."

Dr. Jack Norris followed the progress of these experiments, too. Of the psychiatrists, he said: "They felt that most alcoholics, or a high percentage of alcoholics, were also schizophrenics, and that this was one way of foreshortening the process of psychotherapy."

Nell continues the story: "Anyway, Bill wanted to see what it was like. He was intrigued with the work that Osmond and Hoffer were doing in Saskatoon with alcoholics. And he thought: 'Anything that helps the alcoholics is good and shouldn't be dismissed out of hand. Techniques should be explored that would help some guy or gal recover who could not do it through A.A. or any other way.' He gave his full enthusiasm [to] what other people were doing along that line. That's why he took it himself. He had an experience [that] was totally spiritual, [like] his initial spiritual experience."

Bill first took LSD in California, under the guidance of Gerald

Heard. Also present, and guiding, was Sidney Cohen, psychiatrist at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration Hospital. The date was August 29, 1956. Tom P. was there, and he and Gerald Heard took notes about the events of the afternoon.

Bill was enthusiastic about his experience; he felt it helped him eliminate many barriers erected by the self, or ego, that stand in the way of one's direct experience of the cosmos and of God. He thought he might have found something that could make a big difference to the lives of many who still suffered. Soon, he had a group of people — psychiatrists, ministers, publishers, and friends — interested in further experiments with the substance. Far from keeping his activities a secret, he was eager to spread the word. (Secrecy was never Bill's strong point. His candor, certainly an important part of his great charm and credibility, also had its drawbacks. As Nell said, if you did not want something to be publicly known, you were well advised not to share it with Bill. In a word, he was open about his own affairs and those of others.)

He invited many of his closest associates to join him in the experience. Those invited included Father Dowling, who accepted, Dr. Jack, who did not,² and Sam Shoemaker. Bill reported to Shoemaker: "You will be highly interested to know that Father Ed Dowling attended one of our LSD sessions while he was here recently. On that day, the material was given to one of the Duke precognition researchers,³ a man now located in New York. The result was a most magnificent, positive spiritual experience. Father Ed declared himself utterly convinced of its validity, and volunteered to take LSD himself."

Bill even persuaded Lois to try some: "Even acute heart cases can take the material with impunity, as the uniform effect — no matter what the emotional reaction — is to reduce the heart action slightly. Therefore, I have felt free to give it to Lois, and she had a most pleasing and beneficial experience. It was not the full dose, and I expect shortly to try that on her. Though she doesn't necessarily connect it with the LSD, there

is no doubt she is undergoing a very great general improvement since even this mild administration."

Lois herself had this to say about her experience: "Bill gave me some. Actually, I could not tell any difference. I don't know. I looked down, and I saw things that were clearer, but they weren't any greener — it's supposed to make your perception greater. But I'd always been an observer of nature anyway and looked carefully at things."

It was, in fact, about clearer perception that Huxley had written his now-famous book "The Doors of Perception." Dr. Osmond had given him mescaline, an organic substance that produces effects similar to those of the synthetic LSD. Of this experience, Huxley wrote: "The man who comes back through the Door in the Wall will never be quite the same as the man who went out. He will be wiser but less cocksure, happier but less self-satisfied, humbler in acknowledging his ignorance yet better equipped to understand the relationship of words to things, of systematic reasoning to the unfathomable Mystery which it tries forever, vainly, to comprehend."

That is certainly not A.A. language, but the thought is the same as that expressed by Bill when he wrote about deflating the ego to permit "the influx of God's grace."

As word of Bill's activities reached the Fellowship, there were inevitable repercussions. Most A.A.'s were violently opposed to his experimenting with a mind-altering substance. LSD was then totally unfamiliar, poorly researched, and entirely experimental⁴ — and Bill was taking it.

Bill was generous and openhanded, typically forthcoming in the way he personally acknowledged every complaint directed at him. But he was angry; again, he was facing one of the most irksome problems regarding his relationship to A.A. The name of the problem was Bill's Right to Lead His Own Life vs. A.A.'s Claim on Bill. That was part of his reason for wanting to give A.A. its formal release into maturity at the St. Louis Convention. He had stepped down at St. Louis, but as Dennis

Manders, longtime controller at the General Service Office, so succinctly put it: "Bill would spend the next 15 years stepping down." In other words, everybody — Bill included — was having difficulty letting go.

In a long letter to Sam Shoemaker, written in June 1958, Bill aired his most eloquent and personal thoughts about his relationship to the program, LSD, personal ambitions for his own future, and the nature of the universe. Here are some pertinent excerpts:

"I often write letters to clarify my thinking and to ask advice. In this spirit, I am now turning to you.

"St. Louis was a major step toward my own withdrawal, [but] I understand that the father symbol will always be hitched to me. Therefore, the problem is not how to get rid of parenthood; it is how to discharge mature parenthood properly.

"A dictatorship always refuses to do this, and so do the hierarchical churches. They sincerely feel that their several families can never be enough educated (or spiritualized) to properly guide their own destinies. Therefore, people who have to live within the structure of dictatorships and hierarchies must lose, to a greater or lesser degree, the opportunity of really growing up. I think A.A. can avoid this temptation to concentrate its power, and I truly believe that it is going to be intelligent enough and spiritualized enough to rely on our group conscience.

"I feel a complete withdrawal on my part should be tried. Were any major structural flaws to develop later that I might help to repair, of course I would return. Otherwise, I think I should resolutely stay away. There are few, if any, historical precedents to go by; one can only see what happens.

"This is going to leave me in a state of considerable isolation. Experience already tells me that if I'm within range of A.A. requests or demands, they are almost impossible to refuse.

"Could I achieve enough personal freedom, my main interests would almost surely become these:

"(1) To bring into the field of the general neurosis which to-

day afflicts nearly everybody, such experience as A.A. has had. This could be of value to the many groups working in this field.

"(2) Throughout A.A., we find a large amount of psychic phenomena, nearly all of it spontaneous. Alcoholic after alcoholic tells me of such experiences and asks if these denote lunacy — or do they have real meaning? These psychic experiences have run nearly the full gamut of everything we see in the books. In addition to my original mystic experience, I've had a lot of such phenomenalism myself.

"I have come to believe proof surely exists that life goes on; that if better strategy and modern instrumentation were applied to the survival problem, a proof could be made to the satisfaction of everybody. To my mind, the world badly needs this proof now. So I would like to participate in some of these efforts and experiments.

"I realize that both science and religion have a really vested interest in seeing that *survival is not proved*. They fear their conclusions might be upset. Despite the demonstration of Christ Himself, theologians still argue that blind faith, excepting for Christ's demonstration, is the better thing. They say that people sometimes get into trouble through fooling with psychics. I've seen this happen, too.

"There is the argument that proof of survival would be of no value anyway, especially if it were actually revealed that in our Father's house there are really 'many mansions.' People could then get the idea they still have a long time to work things out, so they would continue to shilly-shally, to their detriment.

"Everything considered, I feel that full proof of survival would be one of the greatest events that could take place in the Western world today. It wouldn't necessarily make people good. But at least they could really know what God's plan is, as Christ so perfectly demonstrated at Easter time. Easter would become a fact; people could then live in a universe that would make sense.

"I've taken lysergic acid several times, and have collected

considerable information about it. The public is today being led to believe that LSD is a new psychiatric toy of awful dangers. It induces schizophrenia, they say. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was Dr. Humphry Osmond who first gave the drug to Aldous Huxley. The interest then spread to Gerald Heard and thence to Dr. Sidney Cohen, psychiatrist [at] the Veterans [Administration] Hospital in Los Angeles. Subsequently, this group then took on Dr. Keith Ditman, a research psychiatrist in the University of California. There is no question of their competence or good faith. They have with them a biochemist, also of U.C.L.A.

"In the course of three or four years, they have administered LSD to maybe 400 people of all kinds. Extensive tape recordings have been taken. The cases have been studied from the biochemical, psychiatric, and spiritual aspects. Again, no record of any harm, no tendency to addiction. They have also found that there is no physical risk whatever. The material is about as harmless as aspirin. It was with them that I took my first dose two years ago.

"[There is] the probability that prayer, fasting, meditation, despair, and other conditions that predispose one to classic mystical experiences do have their chemical components. These chemical conditions aid in shutting out the normal ego drives, and to [that] extent, they do open the doors to a wider perception. If one assumes that this is so — and there is already some biochemical evidence of it — then one cannot be too concerned whether these mystic results are encouraged by fasting or whether they are brought on by [other means].

"At the moment, it can only be used for research purposes. It would certainly be a huge misfortune if it ever got loose in the general public without a careful preparation as to what the drug is and what the meaning of its effects may be. Of course, the convictions I now have are still very much subject to change. There is nothing fixed about them whatever.

"And do believe that I am perfectly aware of the dangers to

A.A. I know that I must not compromise its future and would gladly withdraw from these new activities if ever this became apparent."

By 1959, Bill had personally withdrawn from the LSD experiments.⁵ He did so gracefully. He and Dr. Jack had had some correspondence on the subject of Bill's responsibility as a living founder, and these words from Dr. Jack doubtless helped to assure Bill that his decision had been right:

"You cannot escape being 'Bill W.' — nor would you, really, even though at times you will rebel. The best bets are made with all possible information in hand and considered. I am reminded of a poem written by the mother of a small child, in which she says, 'I am tied down' and goes on to list the ways she is captive, ending with the phrase 'Thank God I am tied down.' To few men has it ever been given to be the 'father image' in so constructive a way to so many; fewer have kept their stability and humility, and for this you are greatly honored. But you are human, and you still carry the scars of alcoholism and need, as I do, to live A.A. The greatest danger that I sense to the Fellowship is that you might lose A.A. as it applies to you."

1. He also wrote dozens of mysteries, which he published under the pseudonym H. F. Heard.

2. Dr. Jack did, however, correspond with Osmond and Hoffer. As scientists, he said, they were less exuberant than Bill: "They were guardedly enthusiastic in their correspondence with me, saying that it had to be given under very careful auspices, and with a considerable amount of preliminary setting of the stage."

3. One of a series of ESP experiments conducted at the Rhine Institute at Duke University.

4. LSD was first brought to national awareness in 1961 through the work of Drs. Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (later better known as Ram Dass), at that time of Harvard. Leary had given LSD to some of his psychology students as part of a class experiment. With neither the proper "guidance" nor the controls that were required to make the experiment scientifically valid, two of the students (both minors) had distressing "flashback" experiences. The experiments, "respectable" and quiet until that time, erupted into a scandal, and Leary left Harvard.

Leary had actually approached Bill during the late 1950's, asking to be included in the work Bill was doing. Bill, who did not want to include him, kept putting him off until Leary stopped asking.

5. By 1963, the Canadian government had banned LSD; in April of that year, Sandoz withdrew it from the market. During the flower-child, hippie, Haight-Ashbury era of the late 1960's, it was manufactured illegally and peddled as a street drug. The advice tragically taken by many LSD abusers was Timothy Leary's slogan, "Turn on, tune in, drop out."