Writer’s Note

The High Priest began with a scene in another screenplay. While researching *The Molecule*, my feature about Albert Hofmann and the discovery of LSD, I reached Hofmann’s encounter with Timothy Leary. By that point, the two men had traveled very different roads with the same substance. Understanding what each brought to that meeting gave the scene a depth that stayed with me. Eventually, I realized I wanted to approach it from the other side. The encounter appears in both projects, but its meaning changes depending on whose life we have been following. Somewhere in that research, I fell in love with Timothy Leary all over again.

From the time I was about twelve through much of my thirties, I was obsessed with the 1960s. The music drew me in, but I wanted to understand everything surrounding it: the politics, protests, court cases, art, underground press, and the ways these people and events affected one another. The Beatles, JFK, Nixon, the Chicago Seven, Woodstock, the Summer of Love. Abbie Hoffman was one of my childhood heroes. So were Leary, John Lennon, Arlo Guthrie, Martin Luther King Jr., and Andy Warhol. My interests were not especially restrained.

I would stare at the pages of Ram Dass’s *Be Here Now* for hours. I followed Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters through books and devoured Hunter S. Thompson’s *Hell’s Angels*. As a teenager, I heard César Chávez speak and had the chance to shake his hand and talk with him briefly. I was thrilled. These were people whose words and actions seemed capable of changing the world, and I wanted to understand how they did it.

Then there was Jimi, Janis, and Bob. Especially Bob. Dylan was, and remains, a god to me. When I pray at night, I pray to Bob.

Back then, many of these heroes could do no wrong. Now, in my fifties, I still love the period and its music, but my interests have broadened and my relationship to hero worship has changed. Writing *The Molecule* brought me back to familiar territory with considerably more skepticism. I could still feel the excitement that first drew me to Leary while recognizing a complicated man with extraordinary gifts, painful contradictions, and a healthy dose of bullshit to keep the whole operation running. That combination made me want to write him.

I initially imagined another feature. But the more closely I followed his life, the larger the film became. Harvard psychologist, spiritual leader, celebrity, fugitive, prisoner, informant, cyberculture enthusiast. Each period had its own relationships, dangers, absurdities, and emotional consequences. Compressing everything into two hours meant either losing entire stretches of extraordinary material or racing through so much upheaval that the audience would barely have time to believe one development before the next arrived.

He seemed to have lived six lives. That became the structure: *The Scientist, The Prophet, The Celebrity, The Exile, The Rat,* and *The Futurist*.

What fascinated me was how often each new version of himself came with a new explanation for what he was doing. Sometimes he was responding to a discovery or an injustice. Sometimes he was finding a way to live with a decision he could not otherwise defend. Figuring out where one ended and the other began became part of the writing.

The Leary we meet in the pilot is interested in measuring, predicting, and changing human behavior. Psychedelics challenge nearly everything about his understanding of the mind. He becomes convinced he has discovered something enormously important and that the institutions around him are moving too slowly to recognize it. I wanted audiences to feel that possibility. Having once admired him so unreservedly, I understood something about why people wanted to follow him.

His family life made the consequences harder to look away from. In the series, Leary can devote enormous energy to understanding trauma in prisoners, students, and research subjects while struggling to respond to the pain inside his own home. Susan and Jack need a father who can stay present when there is no breakthrough to announce and no audience to persuade. He loves them, but that love does not consistently become the care they need.

The people around him kept changing my understanding of the story. Richard Alpert, Rosemary Woodruff, and Joanna Harcourt-Smith each have their own convictions, ambitions, and limits. Following what they give Leary, what they receive from him, and what it eventually costs them became essential. Their lives continue beyond the roles he assigns them.

I also discovered how much I enjoyed writing G. Gordon Liddy. Apparently, my lifelong fascination with the counterculture was preparing me to write something suspiciously close to Liddy fan fiction. Teenage me would have questions.

Humor mattered throughout. Leary could be brilliant, funny, perceptive, reckless, selfish, and sincerely convinced that he was helping people, often within the same conversation. Without the pleasure of his company, I do not think we understand either his appeal or the strange situations he could make seem perfectly reasonable. I wanted room for the audience to laugh with him, even when they could see trouble coming.

I had also followed his final reinvention as it happened. In the early days of the internet, when there was only so much you could do online, I checked Leary's website daily for updates. Decades after the sixties, he had made himself relevant all over again, and I was among the people coming back to see what he would do next. I followed as closely as I could up until his death. I was in college then, and when we heard he had died, we ate Leary Biscuits in his honor. Writing those years meant revisiting something I had experienced as a young admirer, this time thinking about the people caring for the man on the other side of the screen.

Revisiting those years as a writer, I found more than I had understood as a young admirer. His enthusiasm for computers and cyberspace reconnected me with the curious psychologist from the beginning. His relationship with Zach revealed affection and playfulness alongside the familiar difficulty of sharing a life with Timothy Leary. As illness advances, there are still parties, jokes, friendships, and moments of real joy. There is also fear, grief, and unfinished family business that no new philosophy can settle.

For someone who spent so much of his life shaping his own story, dying becomes one last opportunity to take charge of it. What moved me most were the moments when he could stop explaining and let someone sit beside him. Ending with his ashes launched into space felt entirely appropriate: funny, audacious, and unexpectedly moving. After so many words, there is finally silence.

The High Priest stands on its own and also works as a companion to *The Molecule*. One follows the scientist who discovered LSD and spent decades wrestling with what happened after it left the laboratory. The other follows the man who helped carry it far beyond the laboratory. Their shared encounter brings those lives into the same frame, with each story changing what we understand about the other.