

What follows is an edited excerpt from “Psychedelic,” Chapter 7 of Distilled Spirits — Getting High, then Sober, with a Famous Writer, a Forgotten Philosopher and a Hopeless Drunk, written by Don Lattin and published in 2012 by University of California Press, which holds the copyright. It may not be reproduced without the consent of the author and UC Press. For more information about Lattin’s work, go to [www.donlattin.com](http://www.donlattin.com). Purchase the hardcover book at your local independent book store or at Amazon, which also offers an e-book version.

This essay also includes material from a lecture Don Lattin delivered at UCLA in 2013 titled “Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard and Sidney Cohen: Pioneers of Consciousness in the City of Angels,” and from one of his earlier books, The Harvard Psychedelic Club — How Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, Huston Smith, and Andrew Weil Killed the Fifties and Ushered in a New Age in America, published in 2010 by HarperCollins.

## **Bill Wilson, LSD and Role that Psychedelics Played in the History of Alcoholics Anonymous**

*By Don Lattin*

*I am certain that the LSD experience has helped me very much. I find myself with a heightened color perception and an appreciation of beauty almost destroyed by my years of depression...The sensation that the partition between “here” and “there” has become very thin is constantly with me.<sup>1</sup>*

-- Bill Wilson, *Letter to Gerald Heard*, 1957

Bill Wilson had been sober for more than two decades when he dropped acid for the first time. His friend Gerald Heard — an influential but now mostly forgotten British philosopher and mystic — was his guide.

Wilson had his first LSD session at the Los Angeles Veterans Administration hospital on August 29, 1956, when the powerful psychedelic was still legal. At the time, everyone from humanistic psychologists to chemical warfare enthusiasts were looking for something to do with the mind-blowing drug that the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann first synthesized at his Sandoz laboratory back in 1938. A group of researchers, including Dr. Humphry Osmond, thought LSD could be used to treat alcoholism. At first, Osmond and his colleagues thought the drug would

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Wilson to Heard on Jan. 18, 1957.

help them to better understand alcohol-induced hallucinations. It might terrify drunks into changing their ways.

By the time Wilson had his first trip, Osmond had begun to see that it was insight, not terror, which was helping alcoholics mend their destructive ways. At first, it seemed counterintuitive. They were using one drug to overcome addiction to another. But they were doing what Wilson and A.A. had suggested in the second of their twelve steps. They were using mind-expanding drugs to find “a Power greater than ourselves” that “could restore us to sanity.”

Wilson was nervous about taking LSD, so he turned to his most trusted spiritual advisor. He asked Gerald Heard to be his guide, a role Heard took on with many others in the early years of the psychedelic movement. This was four years before Timothy Leary had his first trip and anointed himself the Pied Piper of the psychedelic sixties.

Heard, who lived the last half of his life in Southern California, turned on *Time* publisher, Henry Luce, and his wife, Clare Boothe Luce, Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray and William Mullendore, the chairman of the board of Southern California Edison. He also inspired Dr. Oscar Janiger, a Los Angeles psychiatrist who turned on Gary Grant, James Coburn and Jack Nicholson.

“It was the philosopher Gerald Heard who introduced me to psychedelics,” Janiger said. “He told me that the emergence of LSD in the twentieth century was simply God’s way of giving us the gift of consciousness. He believed that LSD was a device for saving humanity from Armageddon.”<sup>2</sup>

In the summer of 1956, Heard was working with Dr. Sidney Cohen, another early LSD researcher working in Los Angeles. Wilson had been battling his depression and was unsure how he’d react to such a powerful psychotropic agent. Heard told him that everyone has a different reaction to the drug, but tried to put his mind at ease. Cohen, one of the leading researchers in the field, would supervise the session, but Heard would be there as Wilson’s spiritual guide.

We can imagine what Heard told Wilson about LSD based on Heard’s written and recorded suggestions for psychedelic voyagers:

“This should not be undertaken alone,” Heard may have said. “You need a person at your side who is intimately acquainted with LSD. We will not intrude on your experience, but neither will we leave you figuratively or literally in the dark. You’ll feel nothing for the first forty-five minutes or so. Then, as the first hour wears away, some subjects become convinced that they are feeling odd. Some, like the witches of *Macbeth*, feel a prickling in their thumbs, or perhaps a tightening of the skin. Don’t worry. This will pass.”<sup>3</sup>

“Then what?” Wilson might have asked.

“Well,” Heard may have replied, “I don’t know any of our friends who have taken it who haven’t said this one thing, ‘Well, I never knew *anything* like that in the whole of my life.’ First,

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<sup>2</sup> Cody, p. 64

<sup>3</sup> Heard, *Psychedelic Review*.

there are the colors and the beauties and designs and the way things appear. But that's just the beginning. At some point you notice that there aren't these separations that we normally feel. We are not on some separate island -- shouting across and trying to hear what each other are saying. Suddenly you *know*. You know empathy. It's flowing underneath us. We are parts of a common continent that meets underneath the water. And with that comes such delight – the sober certainty of waking bliss.”<sup>4</sup>

By the time Wilson came to Los Angeles for his LSD session, he had developed a close relationship with Heard. Letters they exchanged from the late 1940s to the early 1960s document that friendship. They helped each other through painful bouts of depression. Heard and Wilson had a lifelong interest in psychic phenomenon. Wilson's longtime personal secretary, Nell Wing, shared her boss' fascination with the paranormal. “In the early forties,” she wrote in her memoir, “Bill and Lois often held meetings – or ‘spook sessions,’ as they termed them – in a small bedroom at Stepping Stones (the name for the Wilson's home in Bedford Hills, New York.) for A.A. friends, a couple of Rockefeller people,<sup>5</sup> and even some Bedford Hills neighbors frequently participated in these sessions and experienced unusual phenomena.”<sup>6</sup>

In their letters, Heard and Wilson discussed their common fascination with psychic activity. In a letter to Wilson in the fall of 1950, Heard discusses new research into “telepathic linkage,” but also includes words of support for Bill, who was passing through another time of melancholy. “I do hope your spirits have been backing up your will and insight and that the valley you had to go through has given place to higher ground and brighter outlook,” Gerald wrote.

Heard and Wilson also shared an interest in flying saucers, as did millions of other Americans in the 1950s. Heard was an early proponent of taking these UFO reports seriously. His book, *Is Another World Watching – The Riddle of the Flying Saucers*, was published in England in 1950, and came out in the U.S. the following year. One of its more extraordinary conclusions was that giant, super-intelligent bees might populate Mars. “It is difficult to resist the conclusion,” Heard wrote, “that Mars is ruled by insects.”<sup>7</sup>

By 1954, Heard and Wilson's fascination with flying saucers and psychic activity was taking a back seat to their new interest in psychedelic drugs. One short letter, written by Wilson on September 9, 1954, documents this shift. It also indicates that Wilson may have been invited

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<sup>4</sup> This quote is actually taken for a 1956 TV interview with Heard and Dr. Cohen. To view it, go to [http://www.donlattin.com/pagehpc/dl\\_harvard\\_psychedelic\\_club.html](http://www.donlattin.com/pagehpc/dl_harvard_psychedelic_club.html)

<sup>5</sup> John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was an early A.A. patron, and some of his operatives worked closely with Wilson in the early years in New York.

<sup>6</sup> Wing, P. 56

<sup>7</sup> Gerald Heard had a keen interest in bees. His most successful mystery novel, written under the name H.F. Heard, is the tale of a mad, ingenious apiarist who programs his swarms to kill. That 1941 bestseller, *A Taste for Honey*, was later turned into a British horror movie, *The Deadly Bees*.

to a mescaline session that year with Humphry Osmond and Aldous Huxley, and that Wilson had initially told them he preferred to be an observer, not a participant.

*Dear Gerald,*

*Thanks so very much for your letter of July. I'm glad you like the saucer account; it seems an unusually clean-cut sighting.*

*Am looking forward with great anticipation to your visit in September when I hope that I shall be able to join you along with brothers Osmond and Aldous. Though, for the life of me, I can't see where I have much to contribute. But I shall be an ardent listener and try not to talk too much.*

*As always,*

*Bill*

Osmond confirms that Wilson was initially reluctant to experiment with psychedelics -- even after he presented the A.A. co-founder with evidence that it was helping hardcore alcoholics. One study showed that 15 percent of habitual drunks who were given LSD recovered, compared to only five percent of patients who were not given the drug.<sup>8</sup> Yet Bill was not impressed.

In a talk he gave at the Esalen Institute at Big Sur in May of 1976, Osmond recalled the story of trying to turn on Bill Wilson twenty years before. "Early on I told Bill W. that this was good news. But he was far from pleased with the idea of alcoholics being assailed by some strange chemical," Osmond recalled, "Later on Bill got extremely interested and took LSD with Sidney Cohen in Los Angeles. He likened his LSD experience to his earlier vision of seeing this chain of drunks around the world, all helping each other. This caused various scandals in A.A. They were very ambivalent about their great founder taking LSD, yet they wouldn't have existed if he hadn't been of an adventurous kind of mind."

Historians have been left to guess as to whether Bill Wilson and Aldous Huxley, the famed writer and consciousness explorer, ever tripped together. My guess is they did, perhaps on mescaline in 1954 or on LSD in New York City later in the 1950s, or even in the early 1960s, when Huxley was spending lots of time on the East Coast. Wilson and Huxley may have been present at some LSD sessions that were held at the Santa Monica estate of Margaret Gage in the late 1950s.

The reason we have to guess about all this is a dearth of surviving letters between Aldous Huxley and Bill Wilson. Both men were prodigious letter writers. Bill Wilson's longtime secretary, Nell Wing, states in her memoir that Wilson and Huxley "carried on a lively correspondence for nearly two decades." Lois Wilson says in her autobiography that Heard brought Wilson and Huxley together, after which Aldous became "a lifelong personal friend and admirer" of her husband.

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<sup>8</sup> Hartigan, p. 178.

Wilson's letters to Huxley were probably lost in a devastating fire that destroyed Huxley's home in the Hollywood hills in May 1961. But there is one noteworthy letter from Wilson to Huxley in 1962 in which Bill thanks Aldous for sending him a copy of a book by J. Krishnamurti, the famed Indian philosopher, titled *Declaration of Freedom*.

Wilson writes of how the newspaper accounts of Krishnamurti's struggles back in the 1920s to free himself from his messianic role in Theosophy "oddly stirred me." He later saw how the A.A. philosophy and Krishnamurti's later teachings have a similar approach to "that very same problem of liberation." He writes:

*A.A.'s 'Twelve Steps' for recovery and its 'Twelve Traditions' for the unity of group life carefully avoid coercion. 'Twelve Steps' are made as 'suggestions' and implicit in our Traditions is the idea that these principles, too, can be taken or left alone. We exercise no personal authority, no money can be demanded, nor are any beliefs required.*

*However it is true that in early A.A. life we are subject to an enormous coercion – that of being hourly aware that Barleycorn will destroy us if we don't conform in some degree to A.A.'s attitudes and practices.*

*So men conform at first because they must. Still balking somewhat, we then conform because conformity seems right. Finally we arrive at the place of free choice – no fear of coercion. So long as we hold this plateau we know something of the freedom of which Krishnamurti speaks. In our rather fitful way the most of us are thus moving toward freedom...<sup>9</sup>*

There are several references to Wilson/Huxley meetings in the Wilson/Heard correspondence. "If you see Aldous Huxley, take him my renewed thanks for those engaging hours we spent together," Wilson wrote in an Oct. 13, 1950 letter to Heard. Most of this letter consists of Bill W. recounting the purported psychic abilities of his sister, Dorothy Strong. Wilson wrote that his sister had begun channeling messages from Camille Flammarion, a deceased astronomer and spiritualist. These communiqués from the grave, Wilson writes, even contain references to Gerald Heard. Wilson tells Heard that his sister had "a bad crackup" and "extreme emotional difficulties" three years earlier, but has emerged from those troubles and was "developing marked psychic talents."

Heard responded to the letter within days of receiving it. Heard begins his reply to Wilson by suggesting that he and Aldous Huxley get together with Tom Powers, a close Wilson associate, for another séance. This foursome, Heard writes to Wilson, might uncover "still another chapter of your pioneering and explore – both for the insane and the so-called sane – the border country of psychical research of which you know so much."

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Wilson to Huxley, 1/24/1962

In a letter written in 1956, the same year as his first LSD trip, Wilson refers to another meeting with the Huxleys at the New York home of David and Lucille Kahn, a wealthy couple who participated in some of the early LSD sessions with Wilson in New York. The Kahns were followers of the famous psychic Edgar Cayce. The letter shows how Wilson, Huxley and Heard's longtime shared interest in psychic activity led to their new-found enthusiasm for psychedelic drugs.

“At the Kahn's I recently spent several pleasant hours with Aldous and his charming lady,” Wilson writes. “Since then, Lois and I have most carefully read his recent ‘Heaven and Hell.’ It was one of the most integrating experiences we have known in a long time. We feel positive that he is on precisely the right track. It was astonishing to see how our own psychic experiences, and those of many friends, fitted in to the frame of reference that he has drawn. We could almost substantiate every chapter, page and verse. When you see him, will you please tell him this?”

*Heaven and Hell* was Huxley's second book on the psychedelic drug experience, a sequel to *The Doors of Perception*.

Fortunately, some of Gerald Heard's first-hand accounts of Wilson's psychedelic sessions have survived. Heard took notes during Wilson's first LSD experience at the VA Hospital in 1956. He reports that Bill felt “an enormous enlargement” during the session, started laughing and said “people shouldn't take themselves so damn seriously.”<sup>10</sup>

Here's how Betty Eisner, a UCLA psychologist who worked with Cohen, describes Bill Wilson's thinking coming into the session, and his reaction to the drug:

“Alcoholics Anonymous was actually considering using LSD. Alcoholics get to a point in the program where they need a spiritual experience, but not all of them are able to have one. Tom Powers was Bill Wilson's right-hand man in this. Tom had been through hell with alcoholism, so he brought Bill Wilson out to meet with us. Sid and I thought it might be a good idea to try a low dose together, but when I met Bill, I thought, ‘Uh-oh, this is going to be *his* therapy session.’ And that's one of the things it turned out to be. We each took twenty-five gamma, except for Bill. Sid offered him several pills, and Bill said, “Don't ever do that to a drunk,” and took two. But the rest of us just took one.”<sup>11</sup>

At Bill's urging, Lois Wilson participated in that first session. She claimed to feel nothing spectacular, but did confess that she had “a very pleasant time.” Bill Wilson's secretary, Nell Wing, who also dropped acid in one of the early Los Angeles sessions with Sidney Cohen, said Lois took a very small dose, which may explain the lack of fireworks in her trip.<sup>12</sup>

There are seven letters between Bill Wilson and Sidney Cohen in the files of the Stepping Stones Foundation Archive in New York. They were written between September of 1956 and

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<sup>10</sup> Cheever. P. 241.

<sup>11</sup> Walsh & Grobb, p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Hartigan, p.178

1961. In one written in 1956, Wilson thanks Cohen for the time the psychiatrist spent with him. Wilson then comments on his “Door of Perception” experience, writing:

“The outstanding residue seem to be these: all of the assurances of my original experience were renewed, and more. The sense of the livingness of all things and a sense of their beauty has been considerably heightened and restored...I can report this in spite of the fact that on my arrival home I had a severe reaction of anxiety, weakness, lack of focus and the like. But this time, the depression was pretty much absent.”

In another letter Wilson reports that he keeps hearing gossip about his LSD use in A.A. circles, stressing to Cohen “the desirability of omitting my name when discussing LSD with A.A.’s.”

Cohen writes back to assure Wilson that his series of LSD trials include no other active A.A. members.<sup>13</sup>

Not long after Wilson’s LSD sessions in Los Angeles, Huston Smith invited Heard to give a talk at Washington University in St. Louis, where Smith was a professor of religious studies. Wilson happened to be speaking that same week at an A.A. convention in Kansas City, and he desperately wanted to see Heard. So Huston drove Heard all the way to Kansas City and spent two hours with them in Wilson’s hotel room.

They spent much of their time together talking about psychedelics, a conversation that helped inspire Huston Smith to begin a psychedelic partnership a few years later at Harvard with Timothy Leary. Smith’s most vivid memory of the two hours he spent in the hotel room was Wilson describing his trip as “a dead ringer” for the epiphany he had back at Towns Hospital in the 1930s.<sup>14</sup>

On that night in late 1934, Wilson recalls how “every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy. I was conscious of nothing else at the time.”<sup>15</sup>

There’s a good reason why Wilson’s 1956 LSD trip at the Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Los Angeles would remind him of his 1934 vision at Towns Hospital in New York, where Bill W. had gone to be treated for his chronic alcoholism. In both cases, Wilson had been given hallucinogenic drugs.

Doctors at Towns Hospital employed “the Belladonna Cure” to treat alcoholics. Patients were given an hourly dose of a potion that includes belladonna. Also known as “deadly night shade,” belladonna is a perennial herb with dark purple flowers and black berries. It can produce delirium and is known to be “a powerful excitant of the brain.”

Patients at Towns Hospital were given this potion *every hour for fifty hours*. Wilson’s spiritual experience at Towns Hospital, which he would also refer to as his “hot flash,” could

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<sup>13</sup> Cohen letters provided by the Stepping Stones Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> Lattin, 2010, p.67.

<sup>15</sup> Wilson. 2000 p. 145

very well have resulted from this treatment, along with the delusions and hallucinations that often accompany alcoholic toxic psychosis.<sup>16</sup>

Does the fact that drugs may have fueled Wilson's 1934 revelation diminish its legitimacy or importance? In my mind, not at all. What's most important is that it changed the way Bill Wilson lived his life. He stayed away from alcohol, a drug that nearly killed him and caused so much anguish in the lives of his loved ones. And Wilson went on to help countless other alcoholics do the same.

Our understanding of what really happened to Bill Wilson that night at Towns Hospital is best understood by turning to the same book he opened the morning after his revelation. By his own account, the first thing Wilson did was read *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the book Ebby Thatcher brought to him at Towns Hospital. He says he read it "cover to cover." About midway between the front and back covers is a chapter titled "Conversion." In it, William James argues that the worth of a religious conversion should *not* "be decided by its origin." It doesn't matter whether the revelation comes instantaneously or builds slowly over time -- whether God or drugs or prayer or meditation induces it.

"If the *fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good," James writes, "we ought to idealize and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it."<sup>17</sup>

Bill Wilson idealized and probably inflated the story of his conversion. The tale seems to have gotten better with successive re-telling, as stories do. Careful readers of this book will recall that the myth of A.A.'s founding revelation is remarkably similar to the story that Wilson grew up hearing, the tale of Grandpa Willy and his sudden conversion from demon rum, when he met God on the mountaintop in Vermont and rushed down to proclaim it before the Sunday morning flock at the East Dorset Congregational Church.

It matters little that Wilson may have borrowed a bit of his grandfather's revelation. This is exactly how the stories of our lives are transformed into the religious movements of our times.

Wilson's experience inspired one of the greatest spiritual revivals of the twentieth century. What matters is whether his revelation made him a better person and allowed him to help others. It didn't turn him into a saint – not even close – but it certainly helped him and countless others live better lives.

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Bill Wilson returned to New York following his psychedelic baptism in California in the summer of 1956. His thinking going into the session was that an LSD experience might help him overcome two of his remaining demons – his depression and his addiction to tobacco.

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<sup>16</sup> Pittman, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> James, p. 237.

Gerald Heard's hourly notes from the August 29 session reveal the trip did little to keep Bill away from cigarettes, a lifelong addiction that would kill him in the end. At 1 pm Wilson reported "a feeling of peace." At 2:31 p.m. he was even happier and proclaimed "Tobacco is not necessary to me anymore." At 3:22 p.m. he asked for a cigarette.<sup>18</sup>

His depression lifted for a while, only to return when he got back to New York. "On my return home, I fell into one of my fits of exhaustion, which bordered on serious," Wilson wrote in a letter to Heard. Yet Wilson added, "I do not think that in any way my state is related to my experience in looking through 'The Doors of Perception.' In spite of my temporary condition, I do feel a residue of assurance and a feeling of enhanced beauty that seems likely to stay by me."

A few months later, Wilson was even more upbeat about the long-term benefits from the LSD session. "More and more it appears to me that the experience has done a sustained good," he wrote to Heard on December 4, 1956. "My reactions to things totally, and in particular, have very definitely improved for no other reason that I can see. Tom (Powers) says he has been thinking about the possibility of visiting you soon again with a friend with the idea of trying this out some more."

Powers may have made that trip and returned to New York with a generous supply of the drug, for he and Wilson were certainly committed to "trying this out some more."

Wilson became so intrigued by the spiritual potential of LSD that he formed an experimental group in New York that included a Catholic priest, Father Ed Dowling, and Gerald Heard's editor at Harper and Row, Eugene Exman.<sup>19</sup> The "friend" of Powers that Wilson mentioned in his letter may have been a psychiatrist from Roosevelt Hospital in New York, who served as the supervising M.D. at Bill Wilson's psychedelic salon.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, on the West Coast, Gerald Heard was hosting his own LSD-fueled gatherings in the Santa Monica Mountains at the home of Margaret Gage. It was 1957. William Forthman, the teenager who'd met Heard at Trabuco College during World War II, was now a graduate student at U.C.L.A. Both he and Heard were living at the Gage estate when the psychedelic sessions began. Forthman had already been living in a cottage on the property when Heard arrived. He surrendered the cottage and took a room for himself in the main house.

"When it came to LSD, Gerald was a bit of a Pied Piper," Forthman recalled. "Gerald got Dr. Cohen to give LSD to lots of famous people, not just to Bill Wilson and the Luces. John Huston (the film director) and Steve Allen (the television show host) took LSD at Margaret's house."

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<sup>18</sup> Cheever, p. 241.

<sup>19</sup> Exman had also worked with Wilson in the months leading to the publication of "the Big Book." Harper made an offer to publish *Alcoholics Anonymous*, but Wilson and other early AA leaders decided to self-publish, which turned out to be a very profitable call for both Wilson and AA.

<sup>20</sup> Hartigan, p. 179

They would gather at the Gage home in the morning. Dr. Cohen would arrive with little glass vials of LSD, which he could break open and dissolve in a glass of water. They would start to feel the effects in thirty to forty minutes.

“It gave you a sense that whatever happened was very portentous,” Forthman remembered. “It was a great focuser of attention. People would listen to music. Aldous used to say it wipes out all the normal distractions.”

Bill Wilson thought LSD could help cynical alcoholics undergo the “spiritual awakening” that stands at the center of twelve-step work. It seems unlikely – as some have claimed – that Wilson “developed a plan to have LSD distributed at all A.A. meetings nationwide.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Wilson’s enthusiasm for both psychedelics and spiritualism were among the reasons he decided to officially remove himself from the A.A. governing body – a move that was designed to free him to pursue outside interests without making it seem like they were endorsed by A.A.

Nevertheless, “Bill W.” remained the best-known member of Alcoholics Anonymous throughout the 1950s and 1960s. “Dr. Bob” had died in 1950, leaving Wilson as the surviving founding father of the fellowship. Wilson continued to play a major role appearing at A.A. conventions and writing for its publications for the rest of his life.

According to the anonymous author of Wilson’s official biography, the co-founder of Alcoholic Anonymous felt LSD “helped him eliminate many barriers erected by the self, or ego, that stand in the way of one’s direct experiences 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.”

This explanation in *Pass It On*, published in 1984 by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. in New York, also addresses the A.A. reaction to Wilson’s LSD experiments. “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 experimental – and Bill was taking it.”

Wilson defended his LSD use and psychic experimentations in a long letter written in June of 1958 – a statement that shows how his enthusiasm for the drug caused him to ignore its dangers. Wilson wrote that Osmond and his colleagues had given LSD to hundreds of subjects and there is “no record of any harm, no tendency to addiction. They have also found there is no physical risk whatever. The material is about as harmless as aspirin.”

Wilson also began experimenting with adrenochrome, another drug Osmond was investigating as a possible treatment for schizophrenia. It is sometimes classed as a hallucinogen, although those effects may be diminished when a modified version, leuko-adrenochrome, is administered. This time it was Bill Wilson who would turn on Aldous Huxley.

In a letter to Osmond in the fall of 1960, Huxley writes, “Yesterday I lunched with Bill Wilson who spoke enthusiastically of his own experiences with leuko-adrenochrome and of the

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.dosenation.com/listing.php?smlid=4189>

successful use of it on his ex-alcoholic neurotics. This really sounds like a break-through and I hope you are going ahead with clinical testing. Do you have any of the stuff to spare? If so, I'd be most grateful for a sample."<sup>22</sup>

Wilson may have been following Osmond's lead and experimenting with a chemical cocktail that combined LSD and leuko-adrenochrome.

Father Dowling, a Jesuit priest who had known Wilson since the early 1940s, participated in at least one of the early LSD sessions in New York. He was initially as enthusiastic as Wilson, but would later warn Bill to be more careful with the drug.

Dowling played a major role in promoting A.A. – which was seen by some as a Protestant sect -- as a fellowship that Roman Catholics could join in good conscience. He also inspired Wilson to take another look at Christianity, especially at its long mystical tradition.

In the 1940s, Wilson met regularly with Dowling and Monsignor Fulton Sheen, the popular Catholic radio host. For a time, Wilson considered Dowling to be his "spiritual advisor," and even considered converting to Catholicism. "I *feel* more like a Catholic," he once wrote to Sheen, "but I *think* more like a Protestant."<sup>23</sup> In the end, Wilson did not convert, partly because he felt it could hurt A.A. and partly because of his lifelong distrust of organized religion.

Some of the letters Wilson and Dowling exchanged between 1958 and 1960, the year Dowling died, talk of Wilson's ongoing psychedelic drug experiments.

"On the psychic front," Wilson wrote on December 29, 1958, "the LSD business goes on apace...I don't believe that it has any miraculous property of transforming spiritually and emotionally sick people into healthy ones overnight. It can set up a shining goal on the positive side...After all, it is only a temporary ego-reducer...But the vision and insights given by LSD could create a large incentive – at least in a considerable number of people."<sup>24</sup>

Nearly a year later, on October 26, 1959, Wilson wrote about the controversy the drug sessions had stirred up in A.A, noting, "it must be confessed that these recent heresies of mine do have their comic aspects." He told Dowling "the LSD business created some commotion...The story is that 'Bill takes one pill to see God and another to quiet his nerves.'"

Dowling replied by urging Wilson to proceed with caution, and even suggested that the devil might be working through LSD. Quoting St. Ignatius, the Jesuit priest wrote, "It is the mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance of the angel of light."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, P. 895

<sup>23</sup> Cheever, p. 202.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzgerald. P. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald, p. 98

Wilson's enthusiasm for LSD is best expressed in his correspondence with the famous Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. In fact, the title of my book, *Distilled Spirits*, was inspired by a letter Jung wrote to Wilson in 1961. Jung was discussing how some diehard alcoholics must have a spiritual awakening to overcome their addiction. He pointed out that the Latin word for alcohol is *spiritus*. "You use the same word for the highest religious experience," Jung wrote, "as for the most depraving poison."

That letter of January 30, 1961 -- in response to a long letter Wilson wrote to Jung -- is fairly famous in AA circles. But in my research I discovered a second Wilson letter to Jung. In that letter of March 29, 1961, Wilson writes at length about his experiments using LSD to help members of Alcoholics Anonymous have the spiritual awakening that is central to the twelve-step program of recovery. "Some of my AA friends and I have taken the material (LSD) frequently and with much benefit," Wilson told Jung, adding that the powerful psychedelic drug sparks "a great broadening and deepening and heightening of consciousness."

Most of us who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s do not associate the names Huxley, Heard and Cohen — let alone Bill Wilson — with LSD evangelism. The name that first comes to mind is Timothy Leary, the controversial Harvard psychologist who took the torch from that trio and blazed a burning trail into the collective consciousness of the Baby Boomers.

Bill Wilson would have another cameo appearance in the psychedelic history of the 1950s and early 1960s.

In a letter to Timothy Leary dated July 17, 1961, Wilson wrote that Huxley had "referred enthusiastically to your work." Wilson goes on to write that "though LSD and some kindred alkaloids have had an amazingly bad press, there seems no doubt of their immense and growing value." The AA founder also hints that he knew of Leary's own problems with alcohol, adding that Tim might "find some interest in Alcoholics Anonymous — its principles and mechanism."

## Notes

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