

# Recollections of the Good Friday Experiment - Interview with Huston Smith

by

**Huston Smith**

*Interviewed by Thomas B. Roberts Dekalb, Illinois*

and

*Robert N. Jesse San Francisco, California*

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T.B.R.: This is October 1, 1996. Huston Smith will be telling us about an event that happened in the Good Friday Experiment in 1962. Huston, do you want to tell us about the student who ran out of the experiment?

Huston Smith: The basic facts of the experiment have been recorded elsewhere and are fairly well known, but I will summarize them briefly. In the early sixties, Walter Pahnke, an M.D. with strong interests in mysticism, wanted to augment his medical knowledge with a doctorate from the Harvard Divinity School (Pahnke, 1963). He had heard that the psychedelics often occasion mystical experiences, so he decided to make that issue the subject of his doctoral research. He obtained the support of Howard Thurman, Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University, for his project and also that of Walter Houston Clark who taught psychology of religion at Andover Newton Theological Seminary and shared Wally's [Pahnke] interest in the psychedelics.

Clark procured volunteers from his seminary to engage in an experiment. Howard Thurman's three-hour 1962 Good Friday service at Boston University would be piped down to a small chapel in the basement of the building where the volunteers, augmented by Walter Clark and myself, would participate in it. Half of us would receive, double blind, a dose of psilocybin, and the other half a placebo. The day after the experiment we would all write our accounts of what we had experienced, and Pahnke would have them scored on a scale of from one to ten for the degree to which each subject's experience included the seven traits of mystical experience that W.T. Stace targets in his *Mysticism and Philosophy*. There was one borderline case, but apart from that, the experiences of those who received psilocybin were dramatically more mystical than those in the control group. I was one of those who received the chemical, and I will say a word about my experience before I proceed to the student that you asked about.

The Experiment was powerful for me, and it left a permanent mark on my experiential world view. (I insert the qualifier *experiential* world view to distinguish between the way I *think* and *believe* that the world is, on the one hand, and the way I usually experience it to be.) For as long as I can remember, I have believed in God, and I have frequently experienced his presence in beauty, in nature, and (less frequently) in the clear light of the void that mystics speak of. But until the Good Friday Experiment, I had had no direct personal encounter with Him/Her/It of the sort that *bhakti* yogis, Pentecostals, and born-again Christians describe. The Good Friday Experiment changed that, presumably because the service focused on God as incarnated in Christ.

For me the climax of the three-hour service came during a solo that was sung by a soprano whose voice, through the prism of psilocybin, I can only describe as angelic. What she sang was no more than a simple hymn, but it entered my soul so deeply that its opening and closing verses have stayed with me ever since.

My times are in Thy hand, my God, I wish them there;  
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave, entirely to Thy care.

My times are in Thy hands, I'll always trust in Thee;  
And after death at Thy right hand I shall forever be.

In broad daylight those lines are not at all remarkable, but in the context of the Experiment, as there sung, they said everything. The last three measures of each stanza ascended to a dominant seventh which the concluding tonic then resolved. This is as trite a way to end a melody as exists, but the context changed that totally. My mother was a music teacher and instilled in me an acute sensitivity to harmonic progressions. When that talent and my Christian nurturance converged on the Good Friday story under psilocybin, the gestalt transformed the routine musical progression of that hymn into the most powerful cosmic homecoming I have ever experienced.

There is a second reason for gratitude to the Good Friday Experiment: it rounded out my experience of God's nature. *Jnanic* by nature, I had had (as I have noted) a number of powerful transpersonal experiences of God, but I had not strongly experienced his personal side. The Good Friday Experiment changed that. Since that momentous afternoon, I know firsthand what *bhaktis* are talking about when they speak of their personal, loving relationship with God. All of this is a long prelude to the student who ran out of the experiment, which is what you asked about, but a knowledge of the context helps us understand the episode, I think.

As the chemical came over me, I began to be aware of a mounting disorder in the chapel. After all, half of our number were in a condition where social decorum meant nothing, and the other half were more interested in the spectacle that was unfolding than in the service proper. They were not above commenting on the spectacle and even joking about it among themselves. Afterwards a number of them confessed that feelings of being cheated of the experience helped fuel their quips.

In any case, from out of this bizarre mix, one of our number emerged. He arose from his pew, walked up the aisle, and with uncertain steps mounted the chapel's modest pulpit. Thumbing through its Bible for a few moments, he then mumbled a brief incoherent homily, blessed the congregation with the sign of the cross, and started back down the aisle. But instead of returning to his pew, he marched to the rear entrance of the chapel and exited.

Now, before the experiment began, each of us had been paired with a partner in the buddy system. We knew that one member in each pair would receive psilocybin and were instructed that the other member should look after his partner if the need arose. I was not "John's" partner - but no one else followed him out of the chapel, so I did.

This introduces an interesting parenthetical point. More than once I have been struck by the fact, widely corroborated, that however far one may be into the psychedelic experience (short of the dissociation that John was experiencing), if the need arises to snap back to normal, one has no problem doing so. So it was in this case. When John's buddy didn't respond to his leaving the chapel, I sprang to my feet and followed him out.

He had made a right turn and was striding down the hall, but we had been told that the entire basement had been sealed off for the experiment, so I was not overly concerned. But when he reached the door at the end of the corridor and jammed down its latch bar, it swung open. Something had misfired in the instructions to the janitor, and my charge, zonked out of his skull, was at large on Commonwealth Avenue. I ran after him, but my urgings to return to the chapel fell on deaf ears, and he shook off my grip on his elbow as if it were cobwebs.

What to do? I was afraid to leave him lest I lose track of him, but alone I was powerless to dissuade him from what appears to be a determined mission.

Providentially, help arrived from an unexpected quarter. The wife of someone involved in the study was having a picnic on the grass with their child, and I shouted to her to keep track of John while I rushed back to the chapel for help. The strategy worked. When I returned on the double with Wally and another accomplice, John was still visible a block and a half ahead. Before we reached him, we saw him enter what turned out to be 745 Commonwealth Avenue, the building that houses Boston University's School of Theology and parts of its College of Liberal Arts. We caught up with him on the stairs to the third floor, but Wally's remonstrances cut no more ice than mine had. Together, however, the three of us were able to block his further ascent.

Things were at a standstill when a postman rounded the corner of the steps from below. He was carrying a brown envelope copiously plastered with special delivery stickers, and as he was passing us, John's arm shot out and snatched it from him. I was too occupied to notice the expression on the postman's face, for two of us had all we could do pinning John's arms while, finger by finger, Wally pried the crumpled envelope from John's



vice-like grip and returned it to its stunned carrier. I have often wondered how that postman explained the mangled condition of his packet to its recipient, and how he described the incident to his wife at dinner that evening.

The rest is simply told. Realizing that he was overpowered - barely, for under the influence his strength was like Samson's - John, tightly flanked, submitted to being walked back to the chapel where Wally injected an antidote. Immediately he was back in his right mind but with total amnesia as to what had occurred.

It took twenty-four hours for all the pieces of the episode to come back to him and be fitted into place. God, it turned out, had chosen him to announce to the world the dawning millennium of peace and good will. (As often happens in such cases, the actual wording of the message made little sense to normal ears.) In his homily in the chapel, John broke the news to our congregation, but he needed to get it to the world at large, which was what caused him to leave the chapel. When, walking down Commonwealth Avenue, he saw the plaque announcing "Dean of the College of Liberal Arts" by the entrance to 745 Commonwealth Avenue, it occurred to him that deans have influence, so if he could get to that dean, that dean would call a press conference that would complete John's mission. The postman's packet was for the dean, he felt sure, so if he attached himself to it, it would take him to his targeted dean.

John's long-term feelings about the experiment were heavily negative. He was the only one of its subjects who refused to participate in Rick Doblin's twenty-fifth-year retrospective study of the long-term effects of the Experiment on its subjects and threatened to sue if his name was included (Doblin, 1991).

T.B.R.: Was there something in Howard Thurman's sermon that made him feel he should spread the message or be messianic or prophetic?

H.S.: Not that I noticed. It was a typical Good Friday service with meditations on the seven last words of Christ. Howard Thurman was very good, a spiritual genius, and even without psychedelics, he could move people. People were moved spiritually, uplifted by him, but I don't remember the content of Howard Thurman's words, only their moving impact. Did you ever meet him?

T.B.R.: No. I'd like to have heard him.

HS.: Just recounting this and getting my mind back into that afternoon makes my spine tingle.

T.B.R.: Are there other memories of the afternoon that come to mind?

H.S.: I remember that at times a hubbub seemed to erupt in our small chapel. I was too deep into my own experience for it to distract me, but I was peripherally aware of it and realize now, in retrospect, that a spectator would probably have found us a pretty unruly bunch. After all, half of us were stoned to the point where decorum meant nothing, and the other half - as I learned from several of them the next day - were resentful at having been left out and were not above acting out their resentment in derisive laughter and incredulous hoots at the way the rest of us were behaving.

I also remember a short exchange with one of the subjects in the foyer to the chapel just before the service began. Our doses had been administered an hour before noon, and, already under the influence of my psilocybin and sensing (wrongly, as it turned out) that he was as well, I said to him from the depths of my being, "It's true, isn't it?" He didn't respond and told me a day or two later that he had gotten only a placebo and hadn't a clue as to what the "it" that I had reverentially alluded to was all about. I think of that when I hear people claim that acid enables you to read minds. I couldn't have been more wrong in my surmise as to where things stood with him.

T.B.R.: Anything else?

H.S. Only the renewed gratitude to Wally Pahnke and his Experiment that our conversation has awakened in me. As I noted toward the beginning of our conversation, what his Experiment did for me was to round out my experience of the holy by enabling me to experience it in a personal mode, not just abstractly - a questionable word here - in music and nature and (more rarely) in the clear light of the void. Because Good Friday centers on God incarnated in a person, Christ, in that setting I experienced (for the first time powerfully) the divine in

that mode. Spirit responding to Spirit, deep to deep, in the classic, dualist mode of *bhakti* yogis. This permanently enlarged my experiential toolbox. My first psychedelic experience was neoplatonically monistic; this one was personal and relational. So ever since then I have been able to understand experientially that classic mode of mysticism.

T.B.R.: When was your first, monistic experience?

H.S. New Year's Day, 1961, with Timothy Leary in his home in Newtonville.

T.B.R.: What about carryover from your Good Friday experience? Did it change you?

H.S.: Who knows? As a psychologist, you know better than I do that behavior change is one of the hardest things to measure. Staying off the bottle, or out of jail, for example, seem to be the only objective criteria we have. Subjectively, all of my three or four important experiences left me feeling that I was a better person. And I think that actually, in each case, I was more slowed down, sensitive, attuned to the moment, considerate toward others, and aware of life's wonder and mystery. For a few days, I must immediately add, however, for sooner or later the everyday world always reclaimed me. All I can say is that following the Good Friday Experiment, its spell lasted longer. It was more like three months than three weeks or three days.

T.B.R.: Walter Houston Clark reported the same thing - that he too felt that he was a better person. More considerate of family and friends.

Thank you, Huston, for filling us in on an important part of the Good Friday Experiment not previously recorded.

## References

1. Doblin, R. (1991) - Pahnke's "Good Friday Experiment": A Long-term follow-up and methodological critique. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 23(1), 1-28.
2. Pahnke, W.N. (1963) - *Drugs and mysticism: An analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.